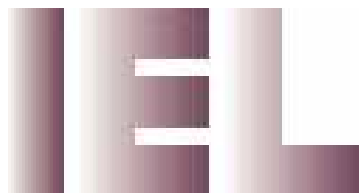


# **Preparing All Youth for Academic and Career Readiness: Implications for High School Policy and Practice**

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For the  
**National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth**

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**Center for Workforce Development  
Institute for Educational Leadership**



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This document was developed by  
The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth  
(NCWD/Youth).

The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. The mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations does not imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor.

NCWD/Youth is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. It is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems in integrating youth with disabilities into their service strategies.

For information on the Collaborative, see  
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# PREPARING ALL YOUTH FOR ACADEMIC and CAREER READINESS: IMPLICATIONS for HIGH SCHOOL POLICY and PRACTICE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges in practices and policy impeding successful post-school outcomes and propose a pathway to address these challenges for youth with disabilities that high schools must address.

Three programs of the Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc. (IEL) assisted in the preparation of this white paper focused on the high school years: the Center for Workforce Development (CWD), which houses the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth (NCWD/Youth)—a national technical assistance center supported by the U.S. Department of Labor’s (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy—was the primary sector of IEL responsible for this paper; CWD was joined by the National High School Alliance (Alliance) and the Coalition for Community Schools (CCS). The Alliance is a partnership of approximately 50 organizations representing a diverse cross-section of perspectives and approaches, with a shared commitment to promoting the excellence, equity, and development of high school-age youth. CCS is an alliance of 170 plus national, state, and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy, as well as national, state, and local community school networks. CCS’s focus is to build connections between schools and their communities and to increase the capacity of both schools and community stakeholders to improve positive outcomes for children and youth through collaborative efforts.

Due to the focus on the needs of youth with disabilities, CWD’s work for NCWD/Youth took the lead on the development of the paper. All of IEL’s work is based on a belief that in order to assist any vulnerable group it is essential to first identify the evidence about what all youth need to succeed as adults, and then expand on this information to include the needs of the specific vulnerable group. NCWD/Youth’s previous research identified what all youth need to succeed, plus the additional support services needed by youth with disabilities. It will become evident to the reader of this paper that youth with disabilities are a part of all categories of vulnerable populations. This paper probes the challenges that states, local school districts, and individual high schools face—and possible actions that need to be taken—in order to prepare all youth with the academic and career readiness skills needed to be successful in the global labor market.

The probe identified five broad policy and practice areas that must be addressed by a range of policy makers at the national, state, and local levels to tackle what high schools can do to alter their approaches for meeting the multiple and complex challenges of all their students. These are: (1) Instruction, Curriculum, and Structure; (2) Assessment Practices; (3) Graduation Requirements; (4) Community and Family Connections; and, (5) Data Quality Challenges.

In preparation of this report, two symposiums were held that focused on the first four policy and practice areas. The HSC Foundation provided support for symposia functions that assembled research, policy, and practice experts from a broad base.

The results of the study provide:

- Information to Federal, state, and local policy makers and practitioners engaged in high school reform efforts to assist them in improving outcomes of youth with disabilities; and,
- Strategic recommendations to the sponsors of the symposium to inform their future work aimed at improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations propose actions to be taken by a wide array of national organizations with a stake in high school reform efforts, as well as the Federal Government and foundations. The recommendations are geared towards strategies that will support reform within high schools, including charter and other alternative schools, in order to improve the transition process for youth and young adults as they move into adulthood. The overarching goal is that all youth will be capable of becoming productive members of the labor force and engaged in civic life. For youth at-risk, including youth with disabilities, a set of values and beliefs will drive the recommendations and include:

- Society should have the belief that all youth have the potential to achieve, if they are challenged by high expectations.
- Institutions have the responsibility to alter policies and practices, where practicable, that impede the provision of supports the youth may need to succeed.
- Success is possible if collaboration is developed among an array of youth-serving organizations, which crosses institutional boundaries and focuses on their achievement of the common goal: providing all youth with the tools necessary to succeed in society.
- Capacity can be built across a wide range of systems and institutions—within education as well as other systems and institutions—to assist youth in pursuing their own niche in the world of work and society.

Operationalizing these values and beliefs means that much must be changed in the way of doing business in schools and communities. Such a culture shift is not an easy thing to do. Collaboration will need to occur, and action plans will need to be developed among a wide array of stakeholders, including: schools, districts, communities, multiple state agencies and state governing bodies, state and national advocacy and membership associations, multiple Federal Government agencies, federally-funded research and technical assistance centers, and foundations. The action sections of the recommendations identify the key actors that need to assume responsibility for moving the agenda forward. The recommendations are intended to be enhancements to the current infrastructure supporting high school and transition reform. The recommendations will not repeat the

strategies that are already “in-play,” such as upgrading standards and aligning curriculum to the standards. Nor will alternative approaches be suggested to Federal policies, such as the decisions made regarding how to assess students with significant disabilities. There are well established mechanisms to deal with these issues.

The recommendations are organized around the five categories discussed in the paper and include three tiers. The first states the recommendation, the next tier suggests who should act, and a third tier, for most of the recommendations, identifies what organizations can support the action.

### ***Schooling***

The recommendations are based on the observations found in the research that teachers are not well-positioned to initiate instructional strategies or design curriculum, primarily due to the lack of time to access evidence-based materials and strategies. In order to address this finding consistent in both generic and special education research, the recommendations are geared toward improving the infrastructure to support the school leaders and teachers in the classrooms. The recommendations also address strategies to ensure all teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to support the multiple learning styles of students. Furthermore, they also address the research-based finding that high schools need to establish connections within their communities in support of their high school reform initiatives, with a particular focus on assisting youth in meeting work-readiness goals.

The symposium participants strongly supported using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach as an instructional design strategy and for the development of curriculum. However, the literature review for this paper indicates there is not a commonly understood agreement about what the UDL term implies. The recommendations that follow are intended to aggressively support expansion of UDL as a means to assist students and professionals involved in preparing them for the world beyond graduation.

**Recommendation 1:** Pre-service and in-service training programs for school personnel need to include the principles embedded in the UDL approach to instruction.

*Who needs to act?* State boards of education, post-secondary schools of education, and state licensure bodies that are responsible for certifying teachers all need to be involved in this process.

*Who can support the action?* National associations (e.g., National Association State Boards of Education [NASBE], Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], and National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE]) should collaborate for the purpose of synthesizing the evidence-based research that states and districts can use to inform policy and practice decisions.

**Recommendation 2:** Major organizations involved in researching and evaluating high school reform initiatives, including both general and special education, should

be convened to address the lack of available data about special education students in studies conducted of programs using gold-standard evaluations.

*Who needs to act?* The research organizations supported by the Federal Government to conduct large scale evaluations.

*Who can support this action?* The American Education Research Association (AERA), and the federally-funded research centers charged with the task of synthesizing research studies in general and special education can be asked to assist in this effort.

**Recommendation 3:** The Federal Government needs to ensure a common set of principles and definitions are applied for UDL.

*Who needs to act?* The Institute of Education Sciences and other U.S. Department of Education Offices need to review current principles and definitions applied by various researchers and providers of technical assistance funded by the Federal Government to promote common usage across multiple initiatives.

**Recommendation 4:** The organizations funded by the Federal Government and those contracted by the states to provide technical support to their high schools should use UDL instructional design strategies in the development of curriculum.

*Who needs to act?* The Federal Government would need to ensure centers that their funds fulfill this recommendation. A focus on the states could be supported by CCSSO and NASDSE in consultation with the National Association Secondary School Administrators (NASSA) and the Alliance to develop an action plan that supports infusion of UDL principles and strategies.

*Who can support the action?* The U.S. Department of Education and foundations should assist in this action.

**Recommendation 5:** Multiple pathway strategies should be used in high schools, to provide students with exposure to community and work-based learning opportunities and chances for coursework to occur through co-enrollment in post-secondary institutions for joint credit.

*Who needs to act?* State departments of education should set the parameters for a multiple-pathways approach based on consultation with post-secondary governing boards, and the state workforce development governing boards. At the local level, support should be sought from the Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) and the post-secondary institutions providing career and technical education in order to connect the multiple pathways to alternative schools and other second-chance education and training programs.

*Who can support the action?* CCSSO, NASDSE, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), National Association of State Directors of Career and Technical Education (NASDCTE), National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), Achieve Inc., and the Alliance. Also, national technical assistance organizations with expertise in one or more of the multiple-pathways approaches referenced in this report can all support the restructuring of high schools. Due to the



wide array of organizations noted, it is recommended that the first two entities mentioned act as initial conveners to develop an action plan.

**Recommendation 6:** Marginal policies and practices that too often result in youth dropping out, specifically suspension and temporary placements in alternative schools, should be reviewed and altered. (See section on *Creating Personalized Learning Environments*, page 21, for a discussion about this recommendation.).  
*Who needs to act?* State boards of education and school districts must take the lead for this action.

*Who can support the action?* To support state boards in their decision-making process regarding alternatives to suspension, they can draw upon resources, such as Arizona State University's Center on Suspension, and other organizations providing research and strategies for alternatives to suspension. For information about alternative schools, DOL's Employment Training Administration (ETA) is currently supporting demonstrations: the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) and the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools.

**Recommendation 7:** A community forum should be established to focus the array of community organizations to support high school reform efforts, and to ensure compatible and reinforcing strategies are employed to assist students in the transition process, through a wide range of services including, but not limited to, exposure to the world of work, mentoring, community service, tutoring, etc.

*Who needs to act?* School districts, mayors, and county commissioners need to be involved, depending on local governance arrangements.

*Who can support the action?* At the national level ODEP, in concert with ETA's Youth Office and ED agencies, should sponsor a forum of youth development and workforce organizations to develop an action plan to assist high schools in the creation of a sustainable forum. The CCS, the National League of Cities (NLC), the National Association of Counties (NACo), U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM), the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY), America's Promise Alliance, the After School Alliance, the Corps Network, the United Way, and NYEC, with representation from education organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and NASSP, all can contribute to the fulfillment of this recommendation. The results of the action plan could be distributed throughout these networks.

## ***Assessment***

**Recommendation 8:** "Best practice" information briefs, focused on test-taking accommodations practices and distributed through Parent Information Centers funded by both NCLB and IDEA, should be developed.

*Who needs to act?* The PACER Center (the national technical assistance center for Parent, Training, & Information centers), CCSSO, NASDSE, and AASA should review the briefs.

*Who can support the action?* The National Center on Education Outcomes (NCEO), which has among its duties the charge of supporting states in the development of

accommodation policies and practice for youth with disabilities materials, can be tapped to prepare the briefs.

**Recommendation 9:** States should consider inclusion of an accessible work-readiness assessment as a part of the state accountability system, and include the results in report cards to the public.

*Who needs to act?* A two-tiered approach is suggested: the first is to convene a symposium, including representation from industry associations, experts in assessments, and representatives of state-based stakeholder organizations, to explore cost-effective strategies to include work-readiness assessments in state accountability systems. The second step would be centered on individual state action. Governors, state boards of education, and post-secondary education and state workforce development boards all need to be involved in the decision. The need for alternative assessments for some youth with disabilities should be included as part of the decision making process. (See the section on *Workforce Focused Competencies*, page 25, for discussion of the issue.)

*Who can support the action?* For the first-tier action, the Federal Government and foundations could support the preparation for and convening of the symposium. For the second-tier, the following organizations can all assist the states considering the options for this recommendation: the National Governors' Association (NGA), Achieve Inc., CCSSO, NASDSE, and NASDCTE due to their work assisting states improve the assessment system for career and technical education programs of study.

**Recommendation 10:** There is an increasing use of web-based assessments for high-stake tests used for determining individual performances for the purposes of education and/or certification credentials and pre- and post-assessments within programs. However, there remain substantive questions regarding the adequacy of accommodations and accessibility for persons with disabilities of these web-based tests. Therefore, there should be a review undertaken to document issues identified by consumers and an action plan developed to ensure accommodations and accessibility are appropriate through both policies of test sponsors and practices at test sites.

*Who needs to act?* Federal agencies charged with supporting success of persons with disabilities in education and training (e.g., ODEP and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS] should take the lead). The first step would be to document concerns from parents and persons with disabilities that have participated in web-based assessments, to establish a list of concerns and challenges test-takers have confronted. The second step would be to convene a symposium of stakeholders, including national oversight bodies, for credentialing organizations (e.g., American National Standards Institute, National Commission for Certifying Agencies) and test-developers to review the processes used to ensure the multiple needs of persons with disabilities have been addressed in the validation of test instruments, and in the identification of appropriate accommodations.

*Who can support the action?* The American Psychological Association (APA), the organization responsible for issuing the national standards used by test-developers,

AERA, and NCEO.

### ***Credentialing and Graduating Requirements***

It should be noted the participants in the first symposium strongly supported reducing the number of diploma options and ensuring youth with disabilities participation in general education courses, to the maximum extent possible, so they can graduate with standard diplomas based on rigorous standards.

**Recommendation 11:** A study of post-school outcomes centered on success in post-secondary education and the labor force for youth with disabilities who have not acquired a standard diploma, to assess the effects of the specialized diplomas, should be supported.

*Who needs to act?* The Federal Government needs to make this a priority study.

**Recommendation 12:** Information briefs should be developed for parents to assist them in understanding the implications of escalating graduation requirements and distributed through Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRC), funded through NCLB, and Parent Training Information Centers (PTI), funded through IDEA.

*Who needs to act?* The PACER Center could be tasked to develop such briefs and the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE), CCSSO, and NASDSE should be reviewers of the draft documents.

*Who can support the action?* NCEO and Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Minnesota, the primary authors of a major study about graduation requirements.

### ***Communities and Families***

The participants in the second symposium recognized that, in spite of legislative requirements for schools to engage families and communities, there is a substantial need to improve the capacity of schools to do so.

**Recommendation 13:** A network of organizations should join together to develop a set of goals and indicators that can be used by states and localities to measure the adequacy of family and community engagement. States should incorporate the indicators in state report cards to the public.

*Who needs to act?* For the family side of the equation, PIRCs and PTIs, NCPIE, and the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) need to be represented. For the community side of the equation, representation from the National League of Cities (NLC), NCY, America's Promise Alliance, the United Way, and the National Forum for Youth Investment is needed. Education organizations included in the collaboration should include groups such as the AASA and NASSP. Each of these organizations all can contribute to the fulfillment of this recommendation. The CCS could be asked to serve in a convening role.

*Who can support the action?* CCS, the Federal Government, and foundations need to support a process to identify the goals and indicators.

## *The Data Dilemma*

**Recommendation 14:** A panel of experts knowledgeable of data challenges should be convened to develop a cross-agency action plan for the purpose of improving disability and non-disability data in order to assess progress in school and post-school outcomes.

*Who should act?* ODEP in collaboration with the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) should jointly convene the panel, which should include Federal agencies responsible for data collection, to develop an action plan to substantially improve the collection of quality data—through administrative records, longitudinal studies, improvement in definitions, etc., with an emphasis on relationships to the data sharing among systems.

*Who can support the action?* Representatives from the Data Quality Campaign, NGA, and other Federal agencies, plus the Gates and Casey Foundations should be asked to participate.

**PREPARING ALL YOUTH FOR ACADEMIC and CAREER READINESS:  
IMPLICATIONS for HIGH SCHOOL POLICY and PRACTICE**

**BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges in practices and policy that are impeding successful post-high school outcomes, and propose a pathway for high schools to address many of these challenges—with an additional focus on youth at-risk, including youth with disabilities.

Three programs of the Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc. assisted in the preparation of this white paper focused on the high school years: the Center for Workforce Development (CWD), which houses the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth (NCWD/Youth)—a national technical assistance center supported by the DOL’s Office of Disability Employment Policy; CWD was joined by the National High School Alliance (Alliance) and the Coalition for Community Schools (CCS). The Alliance is a partnership of approximately 50 organizations representing a diverse cross-section of perspectives and approaches, with a shared commitment to promoting the excellence, equity, and development of high school-age youth. CCS is an alliance of 170-plus national, state, and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy, as well as national, state, and local community school networks. CCS’s focus is to build linkages between schools and their communities and to increase the capacity of both schools and community stakeholders to improve positive outcomes for children and youth through collaborative efforts.

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The probe identified five broad policy and practice areas that must be addressed by a range of policy makers at the national, state, and local levels to tackle what high schools can do to alter their approaches for meeting the multiple and complex challenges of all their students. These are: (1) Instruction, Curriculum, and Structure; (2) Assessment Practices; (3) Graduation Requirements; (4) Community and Family Connections; and, (5) Data Quality Challenges.

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The results of the study provide:

- Information to Federal, state, and local policy makers and practitioners engaged in high school reform efforts to assist them in improving outcomes of youth with disabilities; and,
- Strategic recommendations to the sponsors of the symposium to inform their future work aimed at improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

## CONTEXT

### ***A Stubborn Dilemma, But a Strangely Ignored One***

In studies analyzing the socio-demographic and economic challenges high school reformers must address, the roughly 15 percent of the population considered to have one or more disabilities is seldom recognized as a significant population group. In addition, evaluative studies of successful high school intervention strategies do not examine the impact of the interventions on the disability sub-group(s). Thus, there are substantial gaps between what we know and what we do not know.

While there is much we do not know, we do know that there are some persistent indicators for this population that show unsatisfactory post-school outcomes, accompanied by distressing in-school indicators. The following section outlines some of these important indicators.

### ***Characteristics of Special Education Students During the School Years<sup>1</sup>***

The “facts” that follow are generally recognized as underreporting the number of youth with disabilities. It should also be noted that there is substantial evidence to suggest that it is highly probable that some youth are misidentified—or never identified—as needing special education services.

“Hidden disabilities” refer to that cluster of disabilities that are not readily apparent through observation. In fact, many of these conditions have not been diagnosed, recognized, nor acknowledged by the individuals or their parents. The estimated percentage of persons with disabilities who are included in this category is approximately 75 percent. Included are specific learning disabilities (SLD), such as: attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD); attention deficit disorder (ADD); emotional or behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety disorders, or conduct disorders; and, traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Occasionally, young people with mental retardation are considered to have a hidden disability, for example, where they are socially adept and are able to function without assistance in routine day-to-day activities.

Given these caveats, the following data provides an overview of children and youth participating in special education. It is important to note there is not exact compatibility regarding percentages among the sources of the data (i.e., administrative records used to report the Conditions of Education, or information collected through a longitudinal study approach of the National Longitudinal Study). However, even though the percentages vary by source the message is the same—much work remains to be done to improve these negative trends and outcomes.

- Approximately 13.7% of the student population from pre-K through the age of 22, or about 6,634,000 youth, are involved in special education programs (Digest of Education Statistics, 2005 Tables 51 and 52). Approximately half a million graduate each year.
- For those involved in special education some 11% were classified as having mental retardation; an emotional disturbance--8%; speech or language impairments--19%; a specific learning disability--50%; or other condition--12%, and received special education services. Males were twice as likely as females to be served. Black (10%) and American Indian children (11%) were overrepresented. Blacks were disproportionately represented in three categories: mental retardation--33%; emotional disturbance--27%; and, specific learning disability--18% (Condition of Education, 2005).
- Almost two-thirds of students receiving special education are classified as having a learning disability (62%). Youth with mental retardation and emotional disturbances comprise 12 % and 11%, respectively (NLTS2).
- Another 5% of youth are classified as having other health impairments; 4% are identified as having speech impairments. The remaining 5% is spread through several other categories, such as visually impaired, deaf, etc., with each of these categories having 1% or fewer of students (NLTS2).
- Boys make up approximately 55% of youth with hearing impairments, mental retardation, or visual impairments. In contrast, boys account for about three-fourths of youth with emotional disturbances and 85% of youth with autism. African Americans are somewhat overrepresented among youth with disabilities, relative to the general population. However, this overrepresentation is disproportionately concentrated in a few disability categories; African Americans make up a particularly large proportion of youth with mental retardation relative to their proportion in the general population (NLTS2).

### ***Socio-Economic Factors***

- A higher number of youth with disabilities live in households below the poverty level (68%), and more live in single parent homes (37%) (NLTS2).
- Current special education students can expect to face much higher adult unemployment rates than their peers without disabilities. In 2000, the employment participation was 56% for the working-age population, well below the participation rate of other groups (ODEP).

- The rate of youth with disabilities into the justice system is four times higher than for youth without disabilities (Quinn, Rutherford, Jr., & Leone, 2001).
- The pregnancy rate for youth with disabilities is much higher than the national average. Among females with learning disabilities, for example, 50% will be pregnant within three years of school exit (NLTS2).
- Of the more than 500,000 children in foster care, 30% to 40% are also in special education. However, this number does not capture all youth with disabilities, since many who experience mental and emotional forms of disabilities after reaching adolescence are not identified by the school system. In one study, it was estimated that 20% to 60% of young children entering foster care have a developmental disability or delay.<sup>2</sup>
- The picture is even grimmer for youth with significant disabilities: less than one out of 10 will attain integrated employment; five out of 10 will experience indefinitely long waits for post-school employment services; and most of these individuals will earn less than \$2.40 per hour in sheltered workshop settings (Swenson, S. 2004).<sup>3</sup>

### ***Post-School and Community Factors***

- Youth with disabilities are half as likely as their peers without disabilities to participate in post-secondary education:
  - 32% of youth with disabilities go on to any post-secondary education;
  - 21% of youth with disabilities enter two-year colleges;
  - Only 10% of youth with disabilities enter four-year colleges; and,
  - 6% of youth with disabilities go in to some type of post-secondary vocational, technical, or business school (NLTS2).

Less than 0.1% of young adults with disabilities, aged 18-25, leave the Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSI/SSDI) (SSA 2001).

### ***The Costs of Not Succeeding***

In considering the costs of not succeeding, one indicator is the lost income for individuals and society that results from students dropping out of high school. There has not been a specific cost estimate for youth with disabilities, but estimates show that dropouts in general generate significant losses.

“The income and tax revenue losses associated with a lack of high school completion are already large... While it is difficult and expensive to improve educational attainment among those at-risk of not completing high school, as a society it will also become increasingly costly not to address this issue.

- A high school dropout earns about \$260,000 less over a lifetime than a high school graduate, and pays about \$60,000 less in taxes.
- Annual losses exceed \$50 billion in Federal and State income taxes for all 23,000,000 U.S. high school dropouts ages 18-67—enough to cover the annual discretionary expenditures of the U.S. Department of Education.



- America loses \$192 billion, 1.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in combined income and tax revenue losses with each cohort of 18-year olds who never complete high school. Increasing the educational attainment of that cohort by one year would recoup nearly half those losses”.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Good News: Recent Progress***

While substantial challenges and disconnects remain, positive changes are beginning to occur. Recognition that high school reform is an essential component of our national agenda has finally gained the traction it deserves. The traction has been built on the work of practitioners and policy influencers and makers alike, but it has been a somewhat torturous road. There have been over 30 years of building blocks that have led up to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s flurries of concentration on high school reform.

The decade of the 1980’s was a period of documentation of problems occurring in high schools across the country. For example, *The Carnegie Report on High Schools* under the leadership of Ernest L. Boyer, John Goodlad’s *A Place Called Schools*, Ted Sizer’s *Horace’s Hope: What Works for America’s High Schools*, and a commissioned study by the NASSP, *Shopping Mall High Schools: Winners and Losers in the Education Marketplace*, all contributed to efforts to focus attention on high schools. The results were not flattering, yet the findings did generate action.

The decade of the 1990’s witnessed the growth of new organizations, demonstrations supported by the Federal Government and foundations, legislative actions to improve high schools and post-school transitions. Many have continued into the new century. Examples include:

- The Education Trust was established in 1990 by the American Association for Higher Education as a special project to encourage colleges and universities to support K-12 reform efforts. Since that time, it has become a key voice in the promotion of high standards and accountability systems that are now a part of the education landscape.
- The groundbreaking work of practitioners, such as NASSP’s two publications of *Breaking Ranks* in 1996 and its update in 2004, provided the practitioners’ voice highlighting that high schools required policy and practice changes.
- Recognition that a smooth transition from the school years to the adult world includes a set of specific governmental and private support strategies was first articulated in regard to students with disabilities, through a systems change demonstration launched in the mid-1980s under the leadership of Madeline Will and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). The focus on the transition challenge was later embedded in the School-to-Work Act of 1994, a time-limited initiative that centered attention on the high school years.
- Federal Government systems change initiatives, such as the Goals 2000 Act of 1994, launched the development of voluntary national academic- and industry-

recognized skill standards; Educate America Act; and, the Improving America Schools Act of 1994 that help launch comprehensive school reform efforts.

- Small Learning Communities (SLCs), launched in 2000 by the Federal Government, are funded through discretionary grants to local educational agencies (LEAs) to support activities to improve student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. SLCs include structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or other themes, “houses” in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, and autonomous schools-within-a-school. SLCs also employ personalization strategies, such as student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs.
- The New American High School initiative, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education during Secretary Riley’s tenure in 1996-1997, identified and celebrated high schools demonstrating key elements of success.
- The Coalition for Community Schools was formed in 1997 to build linkages between schools and their communities and to increase the capacity of both schools and community stakeholders to improve positive outcomes for children and youth through collaborative efforts.
- In 2000, the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), brought together educators, experts, students, and others to take a close look at the final year of high school and the transition to college, work, and adulthood. The broader goal of the Commission was to build partnerships among public and private sectors and secondary and post-secondary education, laying the groundwork for reforming the high school experience.
- The National High School Alliance, a coalition of the nation’s leading experts on high school and youth development, was formed in 2001. Its 2005 release of *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth* provided a framework that has informed policy and practice at all levels.
- The disability advocacy community has continued to insist that students with disabilities be included in the sea-change of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability and reform agenda. Of equal significance was the move to embed outcomes for the first time in the 2004 revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided large-scale investments in high school reform, beginning in the early 2000 period and heightened by their public awareness campaign begun in 2005.
- In 2005, National Governors’ Association, in a bi-partisan gathering of political and business leaders, embraced the dual goals of academic and work readiness as key roles of high schools. At this historic Summit, participants went beyond academic achievement as the sole criteria to measure education success and insisted that preparation for work also be an indicator of success.
- In 2005, The Data Quality Campaign (DQC), in a national, collaborative effort, encouraged and supported state policymakers to: (1) improve the collection, availability, and use of high-quality education data; and, (2) implement state longitudinal data systems to improve student achievement. A longer term

goal of the DQC is education data with other key data sources such as workforce development and social service information systems.

- In 2006, Congress reauthorized one of the oldest (1917) Federal grant programs, called Perkins IV Career and Technical Education (CTE). This was achieved primarily through the leadership of state vocational educators, joined by practitioners in local secondary and post-secondary schools, and supported by the employer community as a necessary component of Federal responsibility in education.

These steps have been reinforced by other Federal Government and foundations efforts to identify strategies that promote successful high school experiences for youth moving into the adult world. Some of these strategies are:

1. the need for education *and* workforce development systems to connect and reinforce each other;
2. the development of assessment technologies to improve both academic and workplace preparation measurements;
3. increased attention on “what works” at the high school level regarding instruction, professional development, and the structure of the schools;
4. connections to families and communities; and,
5. promoting collaboration between states’ and school districts’ national networks as a cost-effective strategy to infuse effective and promising practices in an array of issues areas.

### ***Federal Government Attention to the High School Years***

*Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*: First passed in the mid 1960’s and reauthorized in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the requirements of this landmark legislation include: (1) a national goal that all students be judged proficient based on state standards in reading and mathematics by the year 2014; (2) an assessment system to determine proficiency for all students, with data reported by sub-groups of minority populations, limited English speaking, and those with disabilities; (3) a requirement to make available a report card to the public that provides students and parents information about the success of their school in meeting the proficiency criteria; (4) a set of corrective provisions to improve a school’s performance by providing supplemental supports to the students in the school for a specific period of time, after which, if the school is not successful, parents are allowed to choose an alternative school at the expense of the district for their child’s continuing education; and, (5) teachers must be certified as highly qualified (HQT) in their subject matter. This brief summary of 1000-plus pages is intended to show the increased Federal role launched by the passage of NCLB. Perhaps some of the most important parts of NCLB that do not receive much press are the sections of the legislation used to align other pieces of Federal legislation to support the emerging new infrastructure and the outcome-driven approach to monitoring results (e.g., IDEA 2004, Perkins IV 2006).

The NCLB legislation affirms that education is a national responsibility for the first time. This acknowledgement has had substantial ripple effects within the inter-governmental

education system. NCLB alters the long tradition, rooted in the expansion of the nation in the 1800's, that empowered local school boards to establish criteria about access to curriculum and graduation standards, as well as hiring criteria for selecting staff. The legislation required states to: establish benchmarks; define competencies of educators; monitor student achievement; and, provide support for the development of an improved infrastructure to manage the education industry through data-driven decision making processes.

The impact of NCLB on high schools must be considered in the context of the Federal funding that has flowed to high schools. Historically, it has been marginal. The ESEA was originally designed for, and today remains focused on, allocating funds to high-need areas based on a targeting formula intended to provide funding to the most high-risk schools and districts. Thus, ESEA has had a marginal influence on high schools due in large measure to the low allocation (approximately 5%) of Title I funds going to high schools. NCLB is, however, influencing what happens in high schools in other ways.

Although many state and local policy makers, the popular press, public opinion polls, and analytic studies suggest that the stated goal of NCLB—that all students will be proficient by the year of 2014—is problematic, i.e., not achievable, it is important to note these same sources mostly support the purpose and general goals of the legislation. In other words, because of NCLB the debate has shifted from the question of whether there should be a set of national measurable goals for the K-12 education system in the United States, to debates about the details of how to achieve a nationally accepted set of goals and what strategies should be used to achieve them.

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*: The special education focus in the high school years is not significantly different from the focus in other grade levels, with the exception of the requirement to include the Individual Education Program (IEP), a transition component, no later than age 16 (though this can be earlier and was specifically set at 14 in the prior act). There are four IDEA 2004 legislative requirements of import for high school reform:

1. **Highly Qualified Teachers (HQT)**: Special education teachers must now be highly qualified in both special education and the subjects they are teaching. General education teachers are not required to have qualifications in special education. Given the departmental structure of high schools (e.g., science, language arts, social studies, etc.), reports from practitioners indicate this has been particularly challenging, because the general practice across the country has been to identify licensure requirements for special education teachers that did not include such specialization.
2. **The New Focus on Accountability**: There are now 20 performance indicators that have been established, four of which high schools will need to pay particular attention to:
  - **Indicator 1** will track the percent of youth with IEPs graduating with a regular diploma.

- **Indicator 2** will track youth with IEPs dropping out of school compared to the percent of all youth dropping out.  
(Indicators 13 and 14 focus on post-school outcomes.)
  - **Indicator 13** requires schools to annually report the percent of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP, which includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the post-secondary goals.
  - **Indicator 14** requires schools to annually report the percentage of youth who had IEPs who are no longer in secondary school, and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of post-secondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school. States are in the throes of developing new information systems to track these outcomes.
3. **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** The law promotes a framework to guide strategies for learning in five key areas: standards; student assessment; technology; curricula; and, instructional materials.
  4. **Expanded Definition of Transition Services with Strong Emphasis on Post-School Outcomes:** In the definition of transition services, new language was added that the IEP must address how to improve the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child, to facilitate the movement to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, as well as a new reference supporting vocational education (rather than the prior language of just vocational training), integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation.

### ***Workforce Development Focus***

*Perkins IV 2006:* The most significant sources of Federal funding for the high school years are those supporting Career and Technical Education (CTE). The new legislation, reflecting continued bi-partisan support from Congress, emphasizes: the alignment of academic and technical curricula; the use of career clusters that will meet the needs of industries that have occupations within the various clusters; the development of career pathway curricula within the clusters; the promotion of dual enrollment in high schools and post-secondary institutions; and, the development of nationally validated assessments based upon the career pathways. Performance indicators, established in the Spring of 2007 by the U.S. Department of Education, require states to develop new information systems to track results aligned with NCLB's indicators, particularly in reading/language arts and math. Post-school outcomes are similar to those required in IDEA with appropriate differences based on the law's purposes.

States are expected to estimate the percentage of students taking assessments who will be reported in the state's calculation of CTE concentrators (defined primarily as a student who has earned three or more credits in a single CTE program area). Performance will be judged on the number of CTE concentrators who pass technical skill assessments aligned with industry-recognized standards. The same indicators are to be used by post-secondary

institutions. These indicators are to be aligned and tracked by another Federal act, the Workforce Investment Act.

*Workforce Investment Act (WIA)*: Another framework piece of legislation centered on workforce preparation that has evolved through several iterations, and is now known as the Workforce Investment Act, passed in 1998. Although WIA does provide services to in-school youth, it also supports second chance opportunities for those who have already dropped out of school, including support of alternative schools. There is also evidence that these second chance programs serve a substantial number, if not an overrepresentation, of individuals categorized as persons with hidden disabilities.

One of the most significant shifts that occurred with the passage of WIA was an attempt to bring 17 federally supported programs together in One-Stop Career Centers, developing a seamless system of workforce preparation in each state. Examples of the WIA's movement towards a seamless system include the following:

1. Transferring Adult Education and Vocational Rehabilitation programs into the WIA law;
2. Providing incentive dollars to states by combing results across several major funding streams' performance standards, including the performance of programs funded under Perkins; and,
3. Developing common performance standards (or at least common definitions) across the various funding streams that are a part of the workforce development system. The obtainment of an industry-recognized certificate is one of the common indicators.

Redirection efforts for states and localities in both education and the workforce preparation systems are still emerging based upon these shifts in Federal public policy, most of which were first advocated by many state and local officials. Multiple cross-boundary issues among the separate programs remain, such as reconciling different reporting requirements across the programs; establishing common units of measurements, and performance criteria; and, providing professional development opportunities to ensure that the staffs working in certain workforce development institutions are knowledgeable about the resources available to clients from other resources. It can be assumed that alignment among the various Federal and state systems will continue to escalate. Two key drivers of this will be: (1) the search for the most effective way to ensure the nation has a well-educated citizenry that is capable of participating in a knowledge-based economy; and, (2) that vulnerable populations will be included in that well-educated citizenry, including those with disabilities. States and communities still need to grapple with how to blend and braid resources available from education-focused funding streams (e.g., NCLB and IDEA) and those available through workforce development programs (e.g., Perkins IV, WIA general support programs supported through Titles I and II, and disability specific through Title IV), as well as other complimentary Federal resources, such as after-school programs supported through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers.

## SECTION I: SCHOOLING ISSUES

The following issues are addressed: (1) Instruction, Curriculum, and Structure; (2) Assessment; and, (3) Credentialing/Graduation Requirements. In each area attention will be given to the challenges and the strategies that can help youth with disabilities achieve *academic and work readiness competencies* during the high school years. These two outcome criteria are generally agreed to be essential for their success as adults and citizens, and were adopted, as noted above, by the NGA at its High School Summit in 2005.

The vast majority of students with disabilities are in general education programs. In the 2003-2004 school year, almost half of all students with disabilities were in regular classrooms 80% or more of the day. Some 28% spent 40-79% of their day in a regular classroom, and some 19% spent less than 40% of the day in a regular classroom. Here, too, there are marked differences among groups. Fifty-five percent of whites and 39% of blacks spent 80% or more of the day in regular classrooms. Only 4% of students with disabilities did not attend regular schools (Digest of Education Statistics, 2005).

An admittedly imprecise classification system was developed to help the reader consider some key variables. These broad clusters are organized around the estimated time students with disabilities spend in mainstream classes. The groups are:

1. The “*Moving On*”: At least 80% of time in mainstream classes. “*Moving On*” includes those participating in mainstream classes and school activities at least 80% of their time. It is likely many of these will not self-disclose after they leave school, will not necessarily be eligible for protection afforded under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and will not be eligible for adult services due to their disabilities. They may need accommodations or participate in intensive compensatory programs, but they will move on with relative ease.
2. The “*Wrap-Arounds*”: 40% to 79% of time in mainstream classes. The *Wrap-Arounds* include those that spend between 40% to 79% of their time in regular programs and may require more intensive school-and community-based support, and are possibly part of the population who will be slotted for alternative assessments, as will be discussed later.
3. The “*High Support*”: Over 50% of time in special education programs. The actual number of youth in the “*High Support*” group is small, and includes those who spend over 50% of their time in special education programs, and those who are the most likely candidates for alternative curricula and assessments that will be addressed later.

### **INSTRUCTION, CURRICULUM, AND STRUCTURE**

There are three criteria used by advocates for educational change to describe what needs to occur to guide reform: rigor, relevance, and relationships. To clarify what is really meant

by “rigor” in particular, the National High School Alliance worked with its partners and other national constituent organizations to come to a consensus on its meaning. These stakeholders agreed that “increasing rigor” cannot be defined narrowly—e.g., increasing the number of course credits required for graduation, implementing high-stakes exams, etc.

The High School Alliance notes: “Rather, rigor must be viewed in the context of a comprehensive set of strategies to provide supports and resources to ensure quality teaching and learning. As such, “rigor” is shorthand for a comprehensive set of ideas, principles, and strategies that lead to a desired outcome: all students well prepared for post-secondary education, career, and civic life. Addressing policy and practice related to specific course requirements, curriculum content and instruction, and strategies to provide supports and interventions, particularly for struggling students are components of increasing rigor for transforming high schools.”<sup>5</sup>

Applying a “standard of rigor” across the full range of these aforementioned issues is a challenge many states are currently tackling. An overview of what is happening is described below.

### *Upgrading and Aligning Standards*

One area in which states have taken the lead is updating academic standards and then aligning curriculum to meet the standards. New features in both of these aspects is the need to decide what work-readiness standards should be included, and determine how and where in the curriculum such standards will be addressed. According to Achieve Inc.’s second update on high school reform activities, released after the 2005 Summit (in April of 2007), 44 states have committed to an examination of high school standards, with 12 states reporting alignment of the curriculum to the new standards at the time of the survey. (That number continues to grow.) “Real-world” is a term of art that Achieve Inc. is using to infuse post-secondary and work-readiness materials into their standards. However, the work-readiness component appears to be focused primarily on incorporating examples from business and industries into math and English courses. More attention will be given to this matter under the following issue section, Assessment.

Another alignment issue relates to technical standards endorsed by industry, as noted previously for CTE and WIA performance standards. The U.S. Department of Education recognized, in its Spring 2007 guidance to the states, that there are insufficient numbers of nationally validated industry standards that states can use in a cost-effective way, which would yield a certificate of competency that is a part of the new performance standards system discussed earlier. Again, more attention will be given to this topic under Assessment issues.

Work to promote alignment has been in progress for some time. One of the most long-standing efforts to integrate CTE and academic efforts is High Schools That Work (HSTW), administered by the Southern Regional Education Board. Cumulative evidence from HSTW for almost two decades shows it is possible to increase academic achievement



in reading, math, and science of career-focused high school students, by combining the content of a college preparatory curriculum with CTE.

### *Changing the Structure of the Schools*

Districts and individual high schools across the country are also pursuing a range of approaches to change the structures of their schools. Included in these efforts in many districts is an increased emphasis on incorporating exposure to the world of work for all students.

Separate tracks for academic and vocational preparation have long defined the structure of high schools. How or even whether work-based learning should be included as a core part of the high school program strategy has long been debated. Until recently much of this debate has been based on the assumption that a work preparation focus was only necessary for those not going on to post-secondary education. However, shifts in the skill requirements of the global economy, as well as the now accepted dual goals of academic and work readiness for high schools, are changing the focus of the conversation.

The extended debate may be almost over. Multiple pathways are being advocated by several national organizations for the purpose of blending the two tracks. The multiple pathways approach captures lessons from a variety of experiments, many coming from the School to Work (STW) initiative. The recognition of the value of multiple pathways may well have more influence on changing the structure and where and how learning occurs in high schools than anything seen in the past several decades. A report prepared for the state of California summarizes the core features of multiple pathways that are emerging based on a variety of studies/policy strategies. The report's authors point out that there are various approaches to achieving multiple pathways, and a state should consider which approach to pursue and how they may want to blend one or more of the identified approaches. There are clear tradeoffs states and localities need to consider among the options for promoting multiple pathways, so as not to generate a "shopping mall" approach that Goodlad and the NASSP identified in the 1980s as a substantial problem. They include:<sup>6</sup>

- *Calibrated academic courses* provide a sequence of standards-based courses, including four years of grade level English (together with literature, writing, reasoning, logic, and communication skills) and four years of math (including algebra I and II, geometry, data analysis, and statistics). There is a need to change the standards to include "new basic skills," such as applied problem-solving and communication skills (The American Diploma Project).
- *Programs housed in various settings* such as small, career-themed schools, career academies in comprehensive high schools, technical high schools with various career clusters, or early- or middle-college high schools with career themes (American Youth Policy Forum).
- *Restructured coursework* that is not dependent on six or seven instructional periods each lasting about an hour, which could consist of a student choosing a program of study and then selecting specific coursework—including academic, professional

and applied work, internships and other experiences, term or senior projects, etc. These could include traditional CTE majors (as defined by Perkins, 2006) or others, such as performing arts, technology, math science, civic education, or service-learning (Lynn, 2000).

- *Flexible time and support*, assuming variations in learning time are “normal,” while to the contrary a lock-step 6-hour day, 5-day a week, and 180-day school year cannot work for all students. It also assumes the resources devoted to compensatory, remedial, and retention strategies could be shifted to supporting *all* students to keep up rather than having to catch up. Time flexibility could include extended day programs, summer bridge activities, and more (Callahan and Finney, 2005).
- *Integrated curriculum* that includes embedding academic concepts in real world contexts, to help students find relationships between academic knowledge and knowledge required in the workplace. This approach promotes the use of having students focus on industry sectors and would draw upon lessons from that industry, to ground the curriculum academically in concepts drawn from the traditional disciplines (Parnell, 1996).
- *Student assignment and choice* stresses that students must have enough information to make informed choices about which pathway they want, and that an initial choice must not preclude alternative decisions later (Various sources).

It is clear from the various models of multiple pathways that how time is used is a major consideration, which must be addressed prior to adopting any particular approach. It is also clear the places where learning occurs will change.

Many new learning settings that can be considered alternative schools, broadly defined, are expanding throughout the country. Raywid<sup>7</sup> originally classified three types of alternative schools based on a program’s goals:

- Type I offers full-time, multi-year, education options for students of all kinds and credits for graduation. This group includes schools within schools, charter schools, career-focused and job-based schools, drop-out recovery, after hours, etc.
- Type II has the distinguishing characteristic of discipline, and students typically do not choose to attend. Students remain until behavior has been modified.
- Type III offers programs that students choose to participate in, and provide short-term therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems.

Since Raywid first developed these classifications, she has suggested some modifications based on the recognition that there is some merging going on between the types of programs. These settings have a common characteristic: they provide personalized and presumably orderly learning environments. It is also worth noting that the DOL is promoting the use of alternative schools to assist the workforce development system in helping at-risk youth prepare for high-growth occupations.

## *Creating Personalized Learning Environments*

The National High School Alliance describes personalized learning environments, a critical feature of high school redesign, as places that “engage, motivate, and support each student; are recognized as a critical feature of high school redesign; and have been found to be particularly effective for at-risk students. By transforming the school culture into one that is student-centered, the school becomes focused on identifying and providing the supports and resources each student needs to develop—academically and personally.”

Another distinguishing characteristic of personalized learning environments identified by the Alliance is the strong, supportive relationship between students and adults. Most high schools, however, are organized in ways that make it difficult for adults to know students well. Strategies for overcoming these organizational barriers include the following:

- Restructuring the size and organization of high schools (e.g., smaller learning communities within larger schools, or developing new, small schools);
- Creating individualized support systems (e.g., developing individual learning plans for each student that map out the curriculum, supports, and other activities they will need to achieve their academic, personal, and post-secondary goals); and,
- Developing an academically challenging curricular and instructional program that makes learning more relevant for students by connecting academic content to real-world problems.<sup>8</sup>

Research identified by the High School Center (HSC) notes there is emerging evidence based on rigorous evaluations about how low-performing high schools can boost student achievement and keep students on track for graduation. The research lessons are based on MDRC’s evaluations of four high school reform models: Career Academies, First Things First, Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (GRAD), and Talent Development. Although the results of these interventions, tested in 16 school districts, did not specifically address participation of youth with disabilities, it must be assumed that some youth from this sub-set did participate.

MDRC notes the larger lesson of this synthesis is that *structural changes to promote personalization and instructional improvement are the twin pillars of high school reform*. Five cross-cutting challenges that high schools face in seeking to influence student outcomes were identified in the research:

- Assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills;
- Improving instructional content and practice;
- Creating a personalized and orderly learning environment;
- Providing work-based learning opportunities and preparing students for the world beyond high school; and,
- Stimulating change in overstressed high schools.

Small learning communities and faculty advisory systems can increase students’ feelings of connectedness to their teachers. It has been shown that providing both features in

conjunction with one another—e.g., extended class periods and special catch-up courses, along with high-quality curricula and pre- and in-service training—can help improve student achievement. Furthermore, school-employer partnerships that involve career awareness activities and work internships can help students attain higher earnings after high school.

It may not be realistic to expect teachers to create their own curricula; instead, they are likely to benefit from well-designed curricula and lesson plans that have already been developed. MDRC observes that teachers in one of the high school reform models said that they had neither the time nor the training to integrate the theme of their small learning communities into their classes; and field research observations and interviews indicate that thematic instruction was uncommon. In another one of the models studied, it was determined that good advance training and ongoing coaching can help teachers make better use of even well-designed curricula.

The High School Center notes the value of intensive interventions, particularly at the beginning of the high school years, such as 9<sup>th</sup> grade academies, extended class periods, special catch-up courses, professional support to teachers, and the establishment of a data-driven system to track and support individual students. Most of these strategies are familiar to special education professionals.<sup>9</sup>

### **THE DISABILITY FOCUS**

It is difficult at this point in time to connect the dots between research lessons from the “general education track” and those from special education research. It is important to note that a part of the challenge is timing. It is only recently that the Federal Government has provided funding to support centers charged with reviewing and synthesizing research studies in a rigorous way, to find instructional strategies that should be broadly adopted based on the principles embedded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as required by IDEA. For example, the Center for What Works in Transition is charged with the task of reviewing special education analyses to identify scientifically-based research through a review of multiple studies. Secondary school-level studies are beginning to emerge from that source. For example, studies focused on academic outcomes using mnemonics, technology, self-management, and peer-assistance interventions are now available and could be incorporated in high school instructional strategies.<sup>10</sup>

CSRQC and the Access Center, a national technical assistance center funded by OSERS, recently produced a report with recommendations to help decision makers ensure that students with disabilities benefit from school improvement and reform initiatives. According to this report, the features of school improvement programs found to most directly impact student achievement from diverse populations include: organization and governance; curriculum and instruction; scheduling and grouping; technology; the monitoring of student progress and performance; family and community involvement; professional development; and, technical assistance.

The report identifies a variety of factors that help school improvement models provide access to students with disabilities, including:

- “Buy-in” of special education personnel for their support and commitment before the school or provider enters a contract. It is also important that professionals who are knowledgeable about teaching disabled students are represented on the school’s improvement teams. Additionally, the model’s on-site facilitator should be knowledgeable regarding special education issues.
- Incorporation of instructional strategies recommended for students with disabilities, such as basing instruction on unique needs, small-group instruction, cooperative learning, and multi-tiered instruction. For students with disabilities and with attention problems, adopting innovative teaching and learning methods (such as using the Internet) may facilitate the engagement of students in classroom content.
- Support for teacher training and for the use of instruction in mnemonics, graphic organizers, concrete representational-abstract approach, differentiated instruction, and computer-assisted instruction to help students with disabilities access the general education curriculum.
- Promotion of flexible grouping by interest and readiness levels within a classroom context of high expectations for all.
- Availability of technology for some students with disabilities to provide access to all educational opportunities considered essential. It is important for schools implementing improvement models to draft policies related to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and assistive technology. UDL is a theoretical framework to guide the development of curricula that are flexible and supportive of all students.<sup>11</sup>

### *Upgrading and Aligning Standards*

The effects of increased standards and how they can and should be used in the context of IEPs are of concern to many special educators, particularly as it affects the “wrap-around and high support” clusters of students. From the available research, it remains unclear how to meet the newer expectations that derive from more rigorous state standards. Also, the evidence is scant on how to embed individual student-focused learning in general education settings, because of the need to cover content with a large group of students. Using peer tutors has shown some promise, as has embedding the instruction in the context of a cooperative learning group. Even though research and demonstrations exist that show promise, special education teachers, like their general education counterparts, do not always take the time to incorporate promising practices in their classrooms, citing time constraints and the lack of administrative support as substantial obstacles.<sup>12</sup>

### *Changing the Structure of the Schools*

Special education strategies have always included altering the structure of the school day to accommodate the individualized needs of students. Strategies, such as pull-out programs, remedial classes, and extending the number of years students may remain in schools, are based on the recognition that for some youth with disabilities more time is

necessary to acquire the needed knowledge and skills. Thus, many of the core strategies identified by general education research in high school reform efforts are familiar to the special education community. However, what occurs within these different structural approaches may need to be reviewed by policy makers and practitioners.

For example, the largest groups of youth with disabilities that enter high school with poor academic skills are those with hidden disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities (LD) and emotional disturbances (ED). Innate intelligence runs the gamut in these two groups; many have high intelligence but process information differently than others. Instructional techniques matter greatly for these groups with learning disabilities. The research suggests that:

“...how special education teachers define their role in relation to adolescents with LD greatly affects the ultimate outcomes these students achieve. The primary role of any support teacher (e.g., a resource or an LD teacher) should be to teach specific skills and strategies to enhance students' effectiveness as learners in their core curriculum classes. By doing so, we optimize students' chances of truly gaining access to the general education curriculum. *Regrettably, support teachers often get caught in the trap of 'tutoring' adolescents with LD in subject matter. This can be an extremely costly and fatal error because it is generally done at the expense of teaching valuable strategies that will enable students to function independently in the content classroom.*” (emphasis added)<sup>13</sup>

OSERS has produced a *Tool Kit on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities*. In this, they highlight two adolescent literacy programs that use compensatory learning strategies: Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), and the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) of Adolescent Literacy.

Each program engages students in reading and writing instruction that combines group work guided by teachers with significant learning time devoted to an analysis of text, clarification of word meanings, prediction of what is ahead, and contextual summarizations. The number of high schools which employ strategy-instructional techniques is not known, but evidence suggests it is not high or integrated school-wide. Unfortunately, evidence indicates that neither special nor general education teachers are trained, nor do they consider it their job, to use formal or informal reading assessments. In addition, practices such as co-teaching have not yet proven to be effective, particularly for youth with learning disabilities.<sup>14</sup>

If multiple pathways are to be expanded that include attention and exposure to work-based knowledge and skills, it will be necessary to consider how to include youth with disabilities. It can be done. For example, Phelps at the University of Wisconsin has identified several approaches that have shown positive results for youth with disabilities, among those approaches developed for all youth. One is Project Lead the Way which integrates academic and career preparation. It is a six course pre-engineering curriculum aligned with science, math, and technology education standards that emphasizes real-world problem solving and interaction with engineers and technicians. Other approaches for

youth with disabilities that Phelps notes have merit include school-based enterprises, well constructed youth apprenticeship programs, and service learning.<sup>15</sup>

For all youth, attention will need to be given to ensuring there is a deliberate connection between work-based learning and what occurs in the classroom. This has been a weak link in many programs of study over the years. While many youth work in part-time jobs during their high school years and can learn valuable skills, these job experiences are not what is envisioned by multiple pathway advocates. Rather, they believe there is a need for a sequence of activities, which connect what goes on *in* the classroom to: assessments of interest; out-of-school exposure to a variety of career pathways; and, opportunities to job shadow and gain structured work experience (paid and unpaid), so the student can make informed choices. To accomplish this, school staff will need to form partnerships with businesses and industry organizations to ensure the linkages occur. Flexibility in staff assignments will also be needed. The challenge for youth with disabilities may be particularly important, as demonstrated by the following findings.

Work experiences are now well-documented as being beneficial to all youth and are particularly valuable for youth with disabilities.<sup>16</sup> Yet, NLTS2 reveals the following about youth with disabilities:

- Only 2% of high school juniors and seniors receiving special education services participate in work-based learning experiences.
- A 2002 survey of students reported that:
  - 56% received no career counseling;
  - 51% received no career assessment;
  - 64% received no job-readiness training;
  - 86% received no job-skills training; and,
  - 64% received no job-search instruction.

Clearly, attention needs to be given to this disconnect. The data suggest it is a serious challenge. Even if youth with disabilities participate in work preparation programs, the quality and focus is suspect. Heard in hallways at almost any conference concerning youth in transition to the world of work, someone will repeat the following litany about the workforce programs for too many youth with disabilities: The vocational preparation that is generally made available centers on the six F's—Food, Filth, Filing, Flowers, Fetching, and Folding. While many youth perform these activities in initial entry-level jobs, if the assumption exists that this is the end of the road for all youth with disabilities, then changes in expectations are needed. A low wage job with little hope for career advancement, coupled with low expectations, is certainly not a desirable state of affairs.

The Perkins IV legislation no longer requires direct funding for youth with disabilities or any other at-risk groups, nor does the new accountability system require information on numbers served from at-risk groups. There is no systematic study available. However, reports from ODEP-funded demonstration projects and other sources note a substantial decline in CTE programs available to youth with disabilities. While CTE programs form the core of work preparation programs, the multiple pathways discussed previously

suggest that it is not necessary to rely solely on CTE funds to support work readiness goals for youth with disabilities. ESEA, IDEA, WIA, and general revenue dollars can also be tapped.

An example of a program that emphasizes exposure to the world of work as a core component is the High School/High Tech (HS/HT) program supported by ODEP. Although this program is currently targeted only for youth with disabilities, its core features are based on what research says *all* youth need to succeed in the labor force, and the program is rooted in the belief that if high expectations for youth exist they will become engaged and seek to meet those expectations. The program deliberately connects school-based learning with work-based and community learning opportunities, and is based on a personalized approach.

The HS/HT program promotes exposure to science, technology, engineering, and math-focused (STEM) careers. It is a year-round program that includes school-based as well as after-school and summer activities. Youth development activities as well as academic support and exposure to the world of work, including work experience, are included. All activities are built around a framework of five categories known as the *Guideposts for Success*. Developed by NCWD/Youth in collaboration with ODEP, the *Guideposts* document what evidence-based research says all youth need for a successful transition, including youth with disabilities. The five areas mirror the National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASSET) standards that focus on what schools need to do to support all youth. The five categories are: school-based preparation; career preparation; youth development and leadership; connecting activities; and family engagement.

ODEP is still in the process of evaluating HS/HT, but the results to date are encouraging. According to a 2006 analysis of data from seven states (CO, DE, FL, MD, MI, OH, and OK), only 12 out of 2,840 students who participated in HS/HT dropped out of school. Approximately 900 of these 2,840 students participated in some type of formal work-based experience, e.g., internships and/or full or part-time employment. Of the more than 750 HS/HT students who had graduated from high school as of June 2006, more than 540 went on to post-secondary education, approximately 72%.

Financing for HS/HT is based on a “blending and braiding” strategy, combining funding from multiple sources, including Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), WIA youth programs, the Developmental Disabilities Act (DD), Centers for Independent Living (CIL), IDEA, and contributions from businesses. In-kind contributions make up a substantial amount of the support provided, because each of the organizations involved recognizes the program addresses their own priorities, and that collaboration is advantageous and indeed necessary. The cost of HS/HT varies based upon the state and local arrangements, but the normal price tag is approximately \$2,500 per student per year.



## *Creating Personalized Learning Environments*

A pillar of IDEA is a personalized learning plan—the IEP. This core concept has now become a pillar of the high school reform agenda. To date, there are two evidence-based, disability-specific strategies that have emerged as significant for helping to promote personalized strategies for youth with disabilities that could prove useful within a Universal Learning Design approach. Check and Connect was identified by the Government Accountability Office (previously known as the Government Accounting Office) as one of three interventions with evaluation findings indicating the potential to improve graduation rates.<sup>17</sup> It is based on the following interrelated strategies:

- Relationship Building—mutual trust and open communication, nurtured through a long-term commitment focused on students' educational success;
- Routine Monitoring of Alterable Indicators—systemically checking warning signs of withdrawal (attendance, academic performance, behavior) that are readily available to school personnel and that can be altered through intervention;
- Individualized and Timely Intervention—support tailored to individual student needs, based on levels of engagement with school, associated influences of home and school, and the leveraging of local resources;
- Long-Term Commitment—committing to students and families for at least two years, including the ability to follow highly mobile youth from school to school and program to program;
- Persistence Plus—a persistent source of academic motivation, a continuity of familiarity with the youth and family, and a consistency in the message that “education is important for your future”;
- Problem-Solving—designed to promote the acquisition of skills to resolve conflict constructively and to look for solutions rather than a source of blame; and,
- Affiliation with School and Learning—facilitating students' access to and active participation in school-related activities and events.

The key to making Check and Connect work is the role of the monitor/mentor, modeled after one of the commonly identified protective factors in resiliency literature—the presence of a caring adult in a child’s life to fuel motivation and foster the development of life skills needed to overcome obstacles. The monitor's primary goals are to promote regular school participation, and to keep education a salient issue for students, parents, and teachers.<sup>18</sup>

Another strategy designed to assist schools’ support of personalized learning environments is the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) approach, which can assist schools in addressing disciplinary problems generated by youth with and without disabilities. This strategy is moving up the education hierarchy, in that it has been used successfully in elementary and middle schools and is now entering into high schools. It is based upon a:

“...three tiered strategy to assist in the development of school-wide, classroom, and individual student interventions that identify, adopt, adapt, implement, and evaluate

student interventions. It is characterized as a problem solving and action planning process through which school leadership teams (a) review information or data about their school, (b) develop measurable and realistic short- and long-term objectives and outcomes, (c) select practices that have demonstrated efficacy in achieving outcomes, and (d) establish systems to enable adaptation of practices and preparation of implementers for...effective use.”<sup>19</sup>

Multiple school districts are adopting this system-wide approach to help personalize the learning environment. Illinois, for example, has provided statewide support to promote this strategy at the high school level, with the primary target population being youth with disabilities.

Just as these two examples show the possibility of using intervention strategies first developed for special education in restructured high schools to meet the needs of all youth, there are other approaches being used to provide small, personalized learning environments. There is a growing use of alternative schools based on Type 1 (i.e., designed to provide credits for graduation) for specific types of disabilities, such as learning specific disabilities and autism. For example, comprehensive *private secondary school programs* for students with learning disabilities are more common than public programs. Many of these came about when well-to-do families with sons or daughters who were struggling in traditional schools got together and established special programs. A review of many private school programs shows that compensatory learning and personal development strategies are a key part of the curriculum, and that students usually participate in vocational assessments, work experiences, and social integration. They also develop independent living skills, receive counseling, and benefit from family involvement, self-determination activities, adapted curriculum, and assistive technology. These schools also generally have a low student-teacher ratio, often ranging from 5:1 to 12:1, and these schools are sometimes used by public school districts as alternative placements if the IEP team determines such would be an appropriate placement.<sup>20</sup>

High school reform requires states, districts, and schools to consider how resources can be channeled away from failed and marginally successful strategies. Two related areas meriting attention are suspension policies and the use of alternative schools that are used primarily for temporary assignments (i.e., Types 2 and 3), many of which are heavily populated by youth with disabilities. For example, a viable alternative to suspension is a strategy to place the student in a service learning program. Arizona has encouraged the use of this approach and evaluated its results. A tool kit has been developed that includes examples from across the country. This strategy requires strong community-school connections, a feature that is recognized as important in the research discussed above.<sup>21</sup>

The placement of students in temporary assignment schools is the second strategy that needs redirection. Attendance in these schools all too often is associated with the students ultimately dropping out. What happens in these schools for youth with disabilities is not well documented. Only one descriptive study focusing on alternative schools in just one state, Oregon, was found; however, a lack of adequate data hampered even this study. Oregon is a leader in supporting the integration of alternative schools into the regular mix

of schools offering degrees. The key recommendation from this study was that further research is needed. The information available about the number of youth with disabilities served in alternative schools apparently varies widely (3 to 20%) by districts and states, with an estimated 12% of all students in such programs being special education students.<sup>22</sup>

States can undertake a review of both policies and practices in all three tiers of alternative schools as a part of the development of strategies to reduce drop-outs and include data on the NCLB sub-groups. If it is determined that alternative placement is essential, the policy should be to encourage that the schools in which the youth are placed be based on the principles of a personalized learning environment. If a student prefers to remain in the alternative school, they should be allowed to do so.<sup>23</sup>

The Recommendation section will address issues emerging from the symposium and identify possible next steps.

## **ASSESSMENT**

It is useful to remember that the law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997) required that special education students be included in state and district assessment systems, and that their performance be reported for 10 years, a feature that has consistently been supported by the disability community. So, the issue of inclusion is not new. What is new is that NCLB has ushered in a new era of increased accountability based on a showing of academic proficiency in reading and math (with science perhaps to follow). IDEA has been built on a long history of measuring educational gains more broadly, including functional living skills, behavioral or social skills, and academic areas beyond reading and math.

It was recognized early in NCLB's implementation that a limited—but controversial—portion (defined in percentages) of students with disabilities would need to be excluded from the expectation of full achievement of proficiency, based upon grade level standards defined by the state academic standards. There has been a substantial back and forth between ED and the states since the passage of NCLB about what percentage(s) of youth that should be, and what the assessment strategies should be for these youth.

In April 2007, after a lengthy public comment process, ED issued final regulations which provided for the following tiered strategy:

- *The majority of students* in special education will receive regular assessment with accommodations, but are expected to meet the standards in the same time frame as other students.
- *2% of students* will receive alternate assessment based on grade-level standards driven by grade-content standards. It is the grade-appropriate content standards clause that is considered to be the most important.
- *1% of students* will receive alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards.

The 1% group, representing youth with the most significant disabilities, the cognitive-challenged population (about 10% of special education students), will likely be assessed based on a functional preparation curricula that emphasizes what is useful in daily life. It is probable that such a test has been used for more special education students than warranted in the past, leading to what some call the “low expectations” dilemma that many youth have cited as being pervasive in their lives.

ED recently funded 27 states, some working together, to develop modified achievement standards and more appropriate assessments for the 1% group, and the establishment of guidelines for IEP teams and training on the guidelines, which is to include parents, to identify students with disabilities who should be assessed based on alternate or modified academic achievement standards. However, it may well be that the assessment for the 2% group (that must be based on grade-level academic standards) will generate more pushes and pulls than the development of the alternative assessment for the 1% group. This may, in many places, require different approaches to instruction and perhaps a modification of the approaches to how students spend their day (i.e., the alterations between the time spent in special and general education time) and much more. In the course of developing the assessments for both groups, it is hoped that substantial consideration will be given to work-readiness curriculum, and to how to document such competencies in an employer-friendly manner (see next section).

Substantial instruction and training for districts’ assessment managers and IEP teams is necessary to make certain that all of the pieces of the assessment puzzle are in place and to ensure that an appropriate assessment system exists. The Center for Education Policy (CEP), which tracks states’ implementation of NCLB, noted in a June 2007 study that it was unable to report on what is happening across the nation in this area, due to considerable shifting within the states as they search for new approaches to meet these requirements. Just basic information about how to provide appropriate accommodations during the test taking process needs attention.

For example, a report published by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2007) notes:

“...[although] the new [NCLB] requirements have greatly improved the rate of participation for students with disabilities in state and district testing, the increased use of test accommodations has created tremendous variability of policies and guidelines—not only with regard to what accommodations can be used for what test, but also who can use them. These differences across states compromise the validity of what the test results tell us. Results are further compromised by research showing a lack of knowledge by those who make important accommodation decisions as well as a lack of consistent implementation of selected accommodations on test day.”<sup>24</sup>

NCLB assessment criteria continue to capture headlines, and substantial investments of time and attention on the part of teachers, principals, districts, and state departments of

education. However, there are broader issues if the dual goals of academic and work-readiness competencies are to be realized. Assessment can either support contextual teaching and learning—or hinder it. With respect to the latter, the significant mismatch between existing state assessment systems and contextual teaching and learning, promoted as an essential ingredient of high school reform strategies, represents a major obstacle. Most state assessments consist mainly of de-contextualized, multiple-choice and short-answer items that address academic core content, whereas contextual teaching and learning emphasizes hands-on, integrated learning of academic and real-world skills. Until large-scale assessment systems include ways to measure the acquisition of “soft skills” (see next section for a description), many fear there will continue to be tension between contextual teaching and learning.

### *Workforce Focused Competencies*

There has been a consistent identification of competencies needed in the workplace for well over 20 years. The latest report, *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, was issued in 2006 by four organizations: The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. Their collaboration resulted in a survey of over 400 employers across the United States, to determine the skill sets employers were seeking when bringing new employees into the workforce, particularly when hiring recent graduates from high schools, community colleges, technical schools, and four-year colleges. According to their findings, employers’ value applied skills (e.g., professionalism/work ethics, oral and written communication skills, teamwork/collaboration, and critical thinking/problem solving) more than educational attainment and basic knowledge of specific subjects such as math and reading comprehension. The survey also indicated a growing frustration among employers over the lack of these applied skills in the new people entering the workforce. This report is but one more affirmation that workplace-readiness issues are of major concern to employers, and that the same categories of skill expectations first documented in 1992 by the DOL Secretary’s Commission on Necessary Skills (SCANS) report remain valid today. SCANS identified core foundation skills (i.e., reading, writing, and math), academic skills, and also added five competency areas needed in the workplace that are sometimes called soft-skills, including: (1) how to use resources; (2) have positive interpersonal relationships; (3) use information; (4) understand systems; and, (5) use technology.

While employers have always been willing to support workforce education programs in the schools, one of their key desires is to have some form of documentation which they trust that will tell them what specific competencies a job applicant brings with them to the workplace. By now, it is well known that the high school diploma fell into disrepute within the employer community; that disrepute remains today. To be responsive to this important customer of the education system—the employer—the supply side has tried to respond and meet their obligation to provide competent graduates. A major emphasis and substantial investments have been made by states to document competencies required in the workplace. Indeed, the vocational track of high schools has been considerably more aggressive than its academic counterparts in supporting third-party assessments of their students. Collectively, state vocational education directors have been supporting the

development of occupational-specific standards since the 1970's. Strong interstate collaborative networks were formed to develop the third-party assessments to realize cost-effective use of funds. The initial efforts to do so focused on job-specific technical assessments, such as those for auto mechanics and welders. At that point in time, this approach followed the vocational education curriculum that centered on preparation for specific jobs for students whom most presumed were not going to pursue post-secondary education. However, that approach has changed radically as skill requirements have shifted.

Today the challenge is to develop assessment systems that incorporate the SCANS type skills that build on core academic foundation skills plus the harder-to-measure soft skills, while simultaneously changing programs of study. On the assessment side of this equation, there have been some recent technology breakthroughs via web-based assessments that reduce the cost of measuring soft skills. Such assessments have utility beyond the K-12 education system, and can be a part of the workforce development system arsenal of tools. Nonetheless, there is a substantial need to document the validity and accessibility of these tests on persons with disabilities.

The shift in the programs of study has necessitated a reconsideration of what can/should reasonably be included in the high school curriculum, and what should be moved into post-secondary education and training programs as a part of career pathway continuums. This provides a good opportunity for K-20 Commissions that are growing throughout the states, along with representatives of workforce development policy making bodies and employer associations, to consider the establishment of a common framework—within which articulation agreements can be established between secondary and post-secondary institutions, e.g., technical schools, community colleges, apprenticeship programs, and industry-endorsed credentialing programs. A common framework will ensure coherence in career-pathways driven education programs.

The work-readiness components of high school exams that are a part of the state accountability system should be reviewed to determine if there are adequate connections to work-related skills. There is reason for caution that this may not be the case. There is substantial evidence that cognitive activity varies by social context, and there are broad differences between school learning and contextualized learning outside of school. Learning in the school needs to be modified to encompass more of the features of successful *out-of-school functioning*.<sup>25</sup> This suggests caution in assuming that it is adequate to measure success for work-readiness using just academic assessments. It also is clear that the meaning of the term “work-readiness” needs to be agreed upon by state policy makers. What follows is a review of the landscape to help in the consideration of what work-readiness means.

Common terminology about how to build a stair-step of certifications of competencies from one level to the next remains elusive, but there is some agreement that there are three broad categories of work-based knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs):

- *Academic and knowledge* skills (e.g., language arts, mathematics, and science);

- *Employability and knowledge* skills (e.g., teamwork, problem solving, and negotiation skills); and,
- *Specific occupational and knowledge* skills (e.g., small engine repair and double-entry bookkeeping, and professional occupations such as medical occupations, lawyers, educators, etc.).

Over the past 20 years, three tiers of work-related assessments have emerged that directly influence any high school reform efforts.

***Tier I: General Work Readiness***

Since the SCANS competencies were identified and embraced by employers (and continue to be), there have been several attempts to develop standardized assessments that would be widely recognized and used by employers in their hiring decisions (i.e., across industries and state boundaries). Due to civil rights legislation and multiple court decisions, in order to be widely recognized across state boundaries such assessments must be validated, and this process must include the documentation of skill requirements in multiple workplaces from all regions of the country. Additionally, the assessment tool(s) must be able to capture the hard-to-measure soft skills. This latter point has proven to be difficult using paper and pencil tests; therefore, several efforts were launched by states to produce industry-valued documentation such as portfolios. The portfolio approach has mostly fallen by the wayside for several reasons, including storage and maintenance issues. Currently, there are three nationally significant assessments under the Tier I grouping. All three are institutionally neutral in terms of where the individual acquires the skills (e.g., secondary schools, second chance programs funded by the various WIA funded programs):

- *The Workforce Certification System* is operated by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), and was originally developed for adult education programs. It remains the most widely used assessment for adult basic education (ABE) programs, and is based upon the GED criteria, meaning the test-taker must be capable of passing a high school level test. It measures student achievement in the areas of academic skills, occupational knowledge, work experience, and learning gains. A technology-based assessment is under development. The system includes a paper and pencil test, and a portfolio for project-based learning. A soft skills assessment is also offered using video simulations. CASAS also provides instructional resources for instructors.
- *The WorkKeys Career Readiness Certification* is operated by ACT, Inc. The WorkKeys system was launched nearly 15 years ago, and around 1 million assessments are administered each year. It originally was based on three assessments—Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, and Locating Information—focused on workplace skills for “common jobs” derived from the SCANS framework. The next generation of WorkKeys-powered work-readiness credentials began in 2000, and was launched in 2006 to build on and help standardize WorkKeys-powered certificate programs. Currently, 21 states have

signed on to WorkKeys as the primary way to assess work-readiness skills, and more are considering doing so. To date, more than 100,000 WorkKeys-powered certificates have been issued. WorkKeys-powered certificate programs provide the capability to identify individual skill gaps relating to the requirements of the workplace and the specific occupations an individual might be seeking to enter. To address these skill gaps, several instructional tools are available and are widely being deployed in schools, colleges, and One-Stop Career Centers across the country. The expansion of the ACT *Career Readiness Certification* reflects a growing recognition that assessments centered on workplace requirements are not the same as academic assessments that are a part of the required state accountability system.

- *The National Work Readiness Credential (WRC)* is the newest nationally validated credential, and is currently in a “soft launch” period in several states and localities. It is a product of collaboration among several states (FL, NJ, NY, WA, and RI), DC, and Junior Achievement Worldwide, and its development has been supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. These entities joined together to fund the development of an assessment that would be trusted and valued by employers for initial entry into the labor force. It is based on work done by the National Institute for Literacy’s Equipped for the Future (EFF) applied learning standards, originally developed to improve outcomes of adult basic education programs. The assessment addresses nine skills identified by a cross-industry set of employers as critical for entry-level tasks and responsibilities. It addresses four categories: (1) Situational judgment—cooperate with others, resolve conflicts and negotiate, observe critically, solve problems and make decisions, and take responsibility for learning; (2) reading with understanding; (3) using math to solve problems; and, (4) oral language (listen actively and speak so others can understand). After more than three years of development, the national launch for this credential is planned for sometime in 2008. The curriculum, based on work done by Florida Works based on the EFF standards, is in the public domain and can be downloaded for free. Also, the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee has developed a “train the trainer” curriculum.

### ***Tier II: Occupation-Specific Credentials***

This category includes the most long-standing, work-focused credentials, which are widely used by credentialing organizations and state licensure agencies. Many have been developed over the years in concert with the vocational education community (e.g., auto mechanics, welders, a range of health care occupations, etc.), and some require even further education and training. Career technical education programs at the high school and community college level have long provided programs of study for these occupation-specific credentials for technical jobs. Many of these credentials are used for meeting performance standards under WIA and Perkins. These credentials range from eligibility for entry-level jobs to higher level positions.



An example of further development in this area is a new grant that has been awarded to SkillsUSA by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as a part of its *New Options for Youth* initiative. This effort is being supported by the DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) to test whether a traditional school-based model of awarding certificates of achievement through competitions could become a useful approach for youth that are the target of ETA's programs, those who are in at-risk groups spelled out in WIA. The credentials in this model will be awarded through a competition process that moves from local/state to a national competition, where the judges are from both industry and education. This grant builds on SkillsUSA's experience in career technical education programs. The materials will be aligned with academic standards and current technical standards used throughout the country. The project will focus on serving at-risk students who may or may not have dropped out of school, helping them to develop proficiency certificates for entry level work that will be used as a part of their annual SkillsUSA Championships.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Tier III: Concentration Credentials***

This is an emerging area and refers to broad industry clusters and the primary job families within the cluster. The National Skills Standards Board (NSSB) (authorized under the Goals 2000 Act in 1994, but not continued when that act expired) helped develop the concepts embedded in this tier of credentials. A key part of NSSB's charge was to develop a more coherent system of technically valid, industry-valued credentials that could be used by employers in hiring, as well as in career-skill development thereafter. NSSB used the concentration approach to frame the strategy for the development of a more coherent system and to be used in education and training programs of study. It funded several collaborative entities that were required to have representatives from industry associations, employers, unions, organizations that issue occupational credentials, and educators. There is a high correlation to the career pathway clusters now embedded in the CTE legislation. Most of the industry organizations involved in NSSB's work continue to be involved in the career pathway cluster work, discussed below, and in the ETA's support to expand industry-recognized credentials.

The work, in part, is driven by the movement to de-emphasize secondary education programs geared to job-specific preparation, and to move towards industry cluster core requirements, based on the recognition that the predominate number of jobs in today's labor force will need post-high school education and training. The challenge that NSSB was charged to address—to establish an understandable building-block system of industry-valued credentials that will help guide education and training programs and help an individual move from being a novice to a highly skilled specialist/professional—remains today.

The NASDCTE has taken the lead in assisting the states and industry representatives in sponsoring the development of these concentration credentials for 16 career clusters. For each of the 16 clusters, a partnership between educators and industry organizations has been developed among many who were involved

with partnerships sponsored by the NSSB, and some of the industry association partners are also involved in the ETA-sponsored work to develop credentials.<sup>27</sup>

According to NASDCTE, the CTE community recognizes that the current national state of affairs is not adequate and is grappling with several big assessment issues. The goal is to help close the skills gap. Currently, the majority of assessments are job specific, costly, and neither appropriate for secondary level nor based on a stair-step approach that will help move a student through a logical sequence of acquiring KSAs (from a novice to a master), as envisioned in the industry-driven career clusters. If a system of technical assessments is to be built that can be used in secondary and post-secondary programs, it is the desire of the CTE community that it mirror the high school Advanced Placement (AP) process. This requires building an infrastructure of CTE national articulation that has value in the marketplace and is portable throughout the country. Thus, the CTE field is grappling with the following questions:

- Do we need a new system of technical assessments based on a set of national technical standards?
- Can assessments that measure technical-skill attainment using just a multiple choice instruments suffice? Or, should they be based on performance?
- How can performance assessments be valid and reliable?
- What does market value mean? Do workplaces and post-secondary institutions value the same things?
- Is this feasible?

These questions will not be answered quickly, but the very fact such questions are being asked is encouraging. How the three tiers of assessments become a logical set of stair-steps will need to be considered because the purpose of each tier has merit in the marketplace.

There are additional questions that need to be considered by states. Among the questions to be answered are:

- Should there be separate forms of assessments to measure success for the work readiness?
- How can the requirements for industry-valued assessments contained in WIA and Perkins IV be included in a work-readiness system?
- Should work-readiness assessments become a part of the high school reform agenda?
- Should work-focused assessments become a part of a state accountability system and be incorporated as a part of state graduation requirements (discussed next)?

The Recommendation section will address issues emerging from the symposium and identify possible next steps.

## **CREDENTIALING AND GRADUATING REQUIREMENTS**

*According to a GAO report, during the 2000-01 school year only 57% of youth with disabilities received standard high school diplomas and 11% graduated with an alternative credential.*<sup>28</sup>

The “rubber hits the road” for students with disabilities and their families when it comes to the question of whether students will be allowed to graduate with their class. Articles in the general press abound across the country, as do examples in specialized education newsletters featuring human interest stories about the issue. The headline on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* on August 21, 2007 was, “When Special Education Goes Too Easy on Students Parents Say Schools Game System, Let Kids Graduate Without Skills.” The article describes concerns by some parents that their children are being short-changed by lax special education programs. Although test scores and graduation rates among special-education students have risen in recent years, some say the statistics mask a drop in skills development and real learning levels. A few parents have even sent high school diplomas back, protesting what they call a meaningless piece of paper.

Across the country, state boards of education are holding hearings and appointing task forces to study the legal, economic, and political effects that graduation requirements may or may not have on youth with disabilities. A headline from an *Education Daily* article captures the gist of concerns being voiced: “Different Diplomas, Different Value and the Four-Year Dilemma.” The article provides two state examples.

“...the state of Virginia, offers four types of diplomas: an advanced diploma, a standard diploma, and two more that are available to students with disabilities. But of those available to students with individualized education programs—a modified standard diploma and a special diploma—neither counts toward the school’s graduation rate. To earn a standard diploma in the state, a student must earn 22 credits, of which six are “verified,” meaning the student earned a unit of credit and achieved a passing score on a standards-of-learning test or other test approved by the state board. For a modified diploma, 20 credits are required, but none must be verified. The state’s special diploma is available to students who complete their individualized education program, but do not meet the requirements for other diplomas; it does not count towards a school’s graduation rate either.

...Elsewhere, in New York for example, the diploma and graduation rate problem is different—though still complex and frustrating. The state does offer an IEP diploma that is much like Virginia’s special diploma, ...we wouldn’t have any disagreement that that particular diploma shouldn’t really be counted as a regular diploma...The bigger problem we currently have with the whole issue of graduation rates is the focus on four years as the standard...For many students with disabilities, they can get a regular high school diploma, but need five or six years.”<sup>29</sup>

There is also the issue of potential legal challenges. For example, an Illinois court ruled that, while students with disabilities can be held to the same graduation requirements as others, the schools must guarantee students access to the curriculum and advanced notice and opportunities to prepare.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Establishing Graduation Requirements***

In order to restore the credibility of a high school diploma, states have been giving increased attention to the criteria that must be used by local school districts to issue the diploma. There are four primary tools being used to increase the graduation requirements:

1. *Alignment between high school and post-secondary exit/entrance requirements.* This is being done through the work of K-20 Commissions. This is tightly linked to establishing more rigorous content standards. According to an Achieve Inc. survey done in 2007, 44 of the 50 states are reexamining standards.
2. *States tightening the types of courses required that, in turn, reduce local flexibility.* Thirteen states now require students to complete a college- and work-ready curriculum to earn a diploma, up from two states in 2005, and 16 more are on track to do this soon. Achieve Inc. notes that at a minimum, high school course requirements need to cover four years of rigorous English and four years of math, including Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, and data analysis and statistics. However, most states have an “opt out” option that parents must sign, if it is determined by the family that a common core curriculum is not in the best interest of the student.
3. *A requirement for students to pass a high stakes test and/or a series of benchmark exams.* The Education Commission of the States’ (ECS) report in 2006 found that 29 states have exit exams. This is two more states than a Johnson and Thurlow study found in 2003.<sup>31</sup>
4. *A range of waivers and options available for students with IEPs regarding the exit exam requirement, as well as some form of allowances made for youth with disabilities to receive a standard diploma.* These allowances include reducing the number of credits, alternate courses, or lowering the performance criteria. In most cases it is left to the local education agency to determine the “appropriateness” of alternate courses through IEP teams. This may be changing.

According to the Johnson and Thurlow study, graduation requirements vary significantly across the states and include at least seven differentiated diploma options:

1. Honors
2. Regular/Standard
3. IEP/Special Education
4. Certificate of Attendance
5. Certificate of Achievement

6. Occupation Diploma
7. Other (most are variations on the above six, such as a certificate with a follow-up plan of action [IEP] related to meeting transition-service needs, alternative adult diploma [GED], etc.).

### ***The Federal Influence***

The NCLB law carefully does not include specifications about what should be included in state/local graduation requirements. It addresses graduation criteria rather narrowly and as a secondary performance indicator. Specifically, it states that a student must exit with a “regular diploma” and in the standard number of years. However, the standard-number-of-years requirement runs counter to the long-established recognition embedded in the IDEA legislation that many youth with disabilities often need more time to complete their education, and that states allow them to stay in school beyond the traditional four years.

A symposium presentation was given by Dr. David Johnson, the lead author of a recently completed study (2007) on graduation requirements based on a survey of state special education directors in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. This was a follow-up study to the prior 2003 survey. In addition to addressing the inconsistency between the NCLB and IDEA legislation, Dr. Johnson noted there is a set of unintended consequences generated by this range of diploma options that need to be better understood:

- Alternative diplomas are not recognized or valued by employers, particularly those that routinely require a regular high school diploma for job entry.
- Alternative diplomas may place students at a disadvantage in their future participation in post-secondary education and employment.
- The increasing array of types of diplomas runs counter to employers’ and post-secondary institutions’ desire for clarity about what is meant by a standard diploma.
- Granting special education-only diplomas and certificates may have future legal implications, particularly when the criteria used to place the students in these diploma tracks are not well understood by parents and students.

The Recommendations section will address issues emerging from the symposium and identify possible next steps.

## **SECTION II: FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES**

The second symposium focused on the recognition that school and education system leaders alone cannot do the hard work of transforming high schools and creating conditions whereby all students succeed. Parents are students’ first educators and must be involved. Communities have the potential to offer a myriad of supports to youth and their families to help overcome barriers to learning. Yet, there is substantial evidence that adequate systems to connect and support meaningful involvement of the two key stakeholders with what occurs in schools is uneven—and generally not considered

satisfactory—around the country. One participant summed it up by observing that a cultural change is needed.

Parental involvement was first recognized in the original special education legislation that mandated a role for parents, by placing them in a theoretically powerful position as a member of the IEP team. It also allowed parents the right to sue the district if access to a free and appropriate education was not given. The NCLB also places emphasis on parents' rights (i.e., to choose another school if the one their child is attending does not meet achievement standards over a specified period of time), and has over 200-plus references regarding the need to engage parents in the schooling process. ED has issued guidance to the field regarding what states and districts need to do to be in compliance with the law. However, metrics have not been established to measure the effectiveness of parental involvement, and there are no requirements for reporting to the public any results in this area.

During the high school years, transition into adult life becomes more important, so attention needs to be given to supporting an effective transition. Much depends upon functional linkages among school, workforce development education and training programs, including vocational rehabilitation services, and other human service and community agencies. A number of factors have stood as barriers to effective collaboration. There is a lack of shared knowledge and vision by students, parents, school staff, and agency staff around students' post-school goals and necessary transition resources. Schools and community agencies often fail to share information, fail to coordinate assessment and planning processes, and frequently fail to take proactive actions to cooperate and collaborate.

### **WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?**

The Center on High Schools (CHS) is charged with summarizing evidence-based research that explicitly includes research focused on youth participating in special education. To date, they have categorized and summarized research relating to family and community involvement. What follows are excerpts from their initial work.

#### ***Parent Involvement:***

Students and parents need meaningful roles in the transition decision-making process, which respect both the students' emerging need for independence and self-determination, and the parents' continuing desire to encourage and support their children. Research shows that involving parents in decisions about their child's high school educational program, and planning for the child's post-high school future are important factors in school success for all students and particularly for students with disabilities. Family involvement and support outcomes include:<sup>32</sup>

- Improved achievement test results;
- Decreased risk of dropout;
- Improved attendance;

- Improved student behavior;
- Higher grades and grade point averages;
- Greater commitment to schoolwork; and,
- Improved attitude toward school.

Outreach, communication, and relationships with families have been identified as key ingredients of effective programs and schools, and are especially important for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.<sup>33</sup> The importance of establishing credibility and trust with culturally and racially diverse populations cannot be overemphasized; cultural responsiveness is essential to establishing such confidence.<sup>34</sup> There are examples of evidence-based practices focused on working with families that have been identified by the Harvard Family Research Project, many of which have worked with high school age youth.<sup>35</sup>

While the value of family involvement is well understood, the current system does not make it easy for families to be effective partners. Multiple service programs exist that have created a confusing, fragmented, and inconsistent system. Parent centers report that families of young adults with disabilities are deeply frustrated by the lack of coordinated, individualized services for high school students, and by the paucity of resources, programs, and opportunities for young adults once they graduate.

One of the symposium presenters, Sean Roy of the PACER Center, the national Technical Assistance Center for the network of disability-focused Parent Information Centers across the country, summed up the issues regarding parent involvement during the high school years. In part he noted that:

- Schools are not very receptive to parent involvement after junior high school. Teachers expect youth going into high school to be “mini-adults” who employ rational planning and are organized—yet, youth do not operate this way.
- The majority of parents likely know they have rights in the special education process, but feel that there may be retaliation if they exert those rights. They consider the school staff more powerful than themselves.
- Many feel overwhelmed and do not ask what may be the consequences if their child fails to meet the goals and benchmarks of the post-school future orientation of the transition plan, which is required to occur by age 16. This most often occurs for parents who have not developed a deep understanding of the IEP process (including the fact that the IEP can be implemented even if the parents have not read and signed it in a timely manner.)
- Many of the families lead complicated lives and are very tired by the time the youth enters high school, particularly if their child has emotional behavior disorders.
- Many parents have had negative school experiences themselves. They are scared that their kid is going to get kicked out. Therefore, they defer to what

the school is saying even though they may know the youth is being set up to fail.

- Parents do not understand NCLB's report cards, jargon, or its accompanying sanctions. They ask, "How can you measure progress annually? How can you justify taking dollars away from a school that is failing? Why is the school failing when my child is doing well?"

Roy also recognized that many schools send a message that special education is carried out to the detriment of regular education, or extra-curricular activities, and substantially effects resource allocations. He noted that many school officials feel that, because of special education, they are forced to look at education through the lens of cost/benefit analysis. His stage-setting observations highlighted the challenges that call for finding new approaches to family and community engagement.

***Community Engagement:***

Community engagement is a two-way street where the school *and* the community actively work together, creating networks of shared responsibility for student success. It is a tool that promotes civic well-being, and strengthens the capacity of schools, families, and communities to support young peoples' full development. When young people see a connection between where and how they live and what they are learning, their attention and interest is deepened and sustained. For instance, adolescents who participate regularly in community-based, youth development programs (including arts, sports, and community service) have better academic and social outcomes—as well as higher education and career aspirations—than other similar teens.<sup>36</sup>

CHS's initial review of the research focused on community engagement notes the following: effective transition planning and services depend upon functional linkages among school, rehabilitation services, and other human service and community agencies. A number of factors have stood as barriers to effective collaboration. There is a lack of shared knowledge and vision by students, parents, school staff, and agency staff around students' post-school goals and necessary transition resources.

CCS notes that school/community relationships tend to run along a continuum, ranging from community bake sales and car washes, to adopt-a-school programs, to family/school/community partnerships, to community schools. Evaluations of community schools—community hubs that bring together the school and community to provide an engaging academic experience, enriched opportunities to help students see positive futures, and provide services designed to remove barriers to learning—show that when communities are involved with schools young people are more likely to:

- Attend and stay in school;
- Have fewer behavioral problems and suspensions;



- Have contact with supportive adults;
- Complete homework;
- Live in stable and supportive environments; and,
- Have their basic needs met.

In order to have such positive outcomes it is important for schools and communities to be deliberate in the development of processes that promote positive relationships. NASET, referenced above, is a national voluntary coalition of more than 40 organizations and advocacy groups representing special education, general education, career and technical education, youth development, multicultural perspectives, and parents. NASET, using the same five framing areas as the *Guideposts for Success*, developed the “standards of practice” regarding what organizations should do to meet the needs of youth identified in the *Guideposts*. It is recognized that it is a substantial challenge to connect schools to community resources needed to assist youth in making successful transitions into the adult world. While these standards have yet to be fully realized, thus far, they do provide a framework that schools and communities can use as a road map to move forward. According to the NASET framework:

1. Organizations coordinating services and supports [should] align their missions, policies, procedures, data, and resources to equitably serve all youth and ensure the provision of a unified flexible array of programs, services, accommodations, and supports:
  - At the state and community levels, public and private organizations should communicate, plan, and have quality assurance processes in place within and across organizations to equitably support youths’ access to chosen post-school options. Each organization has clear roles and responsibilities, and ongoing evaluation supports continuous improvement.
  - Organizations should have missions, policies, and resources that support seamless linkages and provide youth with access to needed services and accommodations.
  - Organizations should provide, or provide access to, seamlessly linked services, supports, and accommodations as necessary to address each youth’s individual transition needs.
  - Organizations should have implemented an agreed-upon process to coordinate eligibility and service provision requirements, helping youth to participate in the post-school options of their choice.
  - Organizations should have shared data systems in place, or have established processes for sharing data, while fully maintaining required confidentiality and obtaining releases as needed. These systems include provisions for collecting and maintaining data on post-school outcomes.
2. Organizations [should] also connect youth to an array of programs, services, accommodations, and supports, based on an individualized planning process:

- Organizations should inform all youth about the need to plan for the transition from high school, and the programs and services available to them.
  - Organizations should use an interagency team process to share decision-making with youth and families, linking each youth to the services, accommodations, and supports necessary to access a mutually agreed-upon range of post-school options.
  - Youth report satisfaction with the services, accommodations, and supports received as they connect to chosen post-school.
3. Organizations [should] also ensure the following occurs:
- Hire and invest in the development of knowledgeable, responsive, and accountable personnel who understand their shared responsibilities to align and provide programs, services, resources, and supports necessary to assist youth in achieving their individual post-school goals.
  - Personnel (e.g., general and special education teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, service coordinators, and case managers) are adequately prepared to work with transition-age youth, understand their shared responsibilities, and use coordination and linkage strategies to access resources, services, and supports across systems to assist youth in achieving their post-school goals.
  - Organizations hire well-prepared staff, provide ongoing professional development and a set of common competencies and outcome measures that hold personnel accountable for their role in ensuring that youth are prepared for, linked to, and participating in activities that will assist them in achieving their post-school goals.
  - Youth and families report satisfaction with the knowledge, skills, and abilities of personnel they encounter in collaborating organizations during the transition process.<sup>37</sup>

***Creating Capacity to Improve Family and Community Involvement in the Education of Youth***

Much is known about the value of engagement of families and communities in the schooling process, and there are multiple examples where this has been done successfully. Yet, as noted, the standards of practice endorsed through the NASET validation process that merged research with practice remains elusive. In the places where CCS has found successful engagement of both families and communities, there are dedicated staff within the district and the schools who have sufficient time to be the point person for families and community groups. The work cannot be accomplished by the function being just one more task in a long list of a busy administrator's job description. The point-of-contact approach is a growing practice in large urban school districts, and often supported by mayors who have become increasingly involved in the governance of schools. This strategy, however, could also be adopted by smaller communities.

Lessons from communities that the CCS has studied have found it is necessary to have a community forum where the stakeholders come together to discuss, focus, and prepare action agendas. The outcomes of such forums should not be program-driven, but must be driven by a common agreement about what youth need to succeed. Communities need to identify an intermediary organization to support these forums. Communities need to agree upon a set of goals and metrics to assess and track policies and practices, and have agreements by the governing bodies of the multiple institutions and organizations that the common goals and metrics will be incorporated into their own system of accountability, and supported within their own programs (e.g., use of professional development resources to support the commonly agreed upon goals, changes in their internal monitoring of results and staffing responsibilities incorporating the agreements, and analysis of their institutional contributions to the community-wide goals are reviewed at least annually by the governing body).

The NASET standards of practice presume there is a commonly agreed upon set of goals and metrics to document progress. However, this is not the case, and this gap must be addressed. A member of CCS, the long standing Public Education Network (PEN), noted that, in their work in communities across the country, issues of engaging families and youth have plagued solid community/family/school collaborations. In response, they are developing a soon-to-be-released “Civic Index” that will incorporate community engagement based on age- and stage-appropriate youth development activities and other characteristics. PEN hopes communities will use the Civic Index as a tool to develop metrics, so each institution can find their niche and contribute to an overall community set of goals and processes for assessing success for youth as they transition from childhood into adulthood.

The symposium attendees participated in two-step brainstorming exercises to identify possible outcomes/results defined as: (1) a condition of well-being for children, adults, families or communities; and, (2) indicators defined as a measure that helps quantify the achievement of an outcome.

Community results centered on three areas:

- Young people are connected to programs, services, activities, and supports that help them gain access to chosen post-school options.
- Communities are desirable places to live.
- Students are engaged and motivated to learn, and are involved in their community.

Family results centered on the following:

- All youth are supported by parents, family members, and other caring adults.
- Families are actively involved in their children’s education.
- Students live, learn, and thrive in stable and supportive environments.

A range of possible indicators was identified that are easily grouped under the community or family results noted above. For example, youth participate in mentoring programs; perform community service; increased numbers of youth engage in work-readiness and social skill training; and, youth understand the implications and choices of course

selections for their future post-secondary life. For family members, they understand implications and choices of course selections for their future post-secondary life; communications with families by the schools is considered positive by the families; and, parents are actively engaged in the education of the youth. For community participation, suggested indicators included organizations come to schools with resources—not just demands—and vice versa; systems are in place to connect to the community (health, mental health, recreation, employers, etc.).

Additionally, the symposium participants addressed a set of questions about what level within the governance system needed to be involved in promoting improved results. All recognized that states must be an active player, along with the representatives of families, the schools, districts, and community groups.

### ***State Support to Enhance Family and Community Engagement***

Schools and communities should not be expected to “go it alone,” because work for many local institutions is driven by state regulations or guidance related to program specific issues. Therefore, collaborative action at the state level is needed to develop a process to map the efforts of multiple agencies relating to family and community collaboration. The purpose of the mapping process would be to find common ground and possible ways to build capacity within communities that address the needs of multiple state agencies. Some states have established Children and Youth Cabinet Councils. Others have designated youth development interagency councils, interagency transition councils focused on youth with disabilities, or are using Youth Councils that are a part of the state workforce development boards (SWIBs). Regardless of the structures, each must address how to improve outcomes in the results-driven world of increased accountability in government programs. A review and assessment of how individual programs support or inhibit community and family engagement, and to find commonalities in terms of results and metrics are important steps for all stakeholders.

One state, Kentucky, has placed community and family engagement into law. It is the first state to incorporate a communities and families engagement accountability system in its state education and its report card to the public. The Commissioner’s Parents Advisory Council (CPAC), under the state’s Commissioner of Education, worked for several years to reach consensus, and identified six objectives that cover: relationship-building; effective communication; decision-making; advocacy; learning opportunities; and, community partnerships. In a recently released report by CPAC aptly titled, *The Missing Piece of the Proficiency Puzzle*,<sup>38</sup> the state finally has a rubric that allows educators or parents to rate 39 aspects of a school’s parent and community involvement, which cover these six objectives, and give ratings of (a) distinguished, (b) proficient, (c) apprentice, or (d) novice. The ratings are used in the state report card and other tools.

CPAC recommended that the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) take four major actions:

#### **1. Set high expectations, measure performance, and report progress.**

- Adopt the proposed Kentucky Family and Community Involvement Guide to Student Achievement as an audit tool that can serve as a scoring guide or rubric.
  - Incorporate these individual performance descriptors, as appropriate, into the Standards and Indicators for School Improvement (SISI) document.
- 2. Help schools improve relationship-building and communications.**
- Encourage schools to adopt a “customer satisfaction” model by developing training modules that local districts can use.
  - Make data and other information on family involvement available on the KDE website, including the results of a regular statewide parent survey.
  - Establish family and community involvement advisory councils at all levels—local, district, and state.
- 3. Provide resources and support.**
- Develop an infrastructure for state support of districts and schools, which includes training, resources, tools, and recognition for real achievement in family and community involvement.
  - Add reader-friendly information and resources to the KDE website, including the work of the CPAC, research on parent involvement and effective practice, as well as state and community-based resources that could facilitate coordination of family involvement.
- 4. Build capacity through professional development.**
- Invest in parents by providing funding for statewide parent leadership training, developing a parent education curriculum for monitoring a student’s progress, and developing a diverse network of parents who are trained and supported by the KDE to act as mentors, trainers, and team members to assist Kentucky schools, districts, and parents.
  - Invest in educators through professional development on strategies for engaging families in improving student achievement.
  - Invest in collaboration by developing joint parent-teacher training on cultural competence, and by improving training for councils and audit teams on the effective use of the new objectives and performance descriptors.
  - Invest in evaluation by developing measurements to assess the impact of professional development on levels of family and community involvement, teacher satisfaction, school climate, and student outcomes, and by recognizing schools and districts that have fully implemented the new objectives.

### **SECTION III: THE DATA DILEMMA**

Information garnered for this section of the report was based on interviews with individuals, and on participation in sessions sponsored by other organizations. Improved use of data in school reform, both disability and non-disability specific, is essential—and specific data issues of importance at the high school level that need to be shared with other state systems (e.g., mental health, foster care, workforce development, juvenile justice, health, etc.) need to be addressed.

An example of the growing awareness of the need for improved data to assist state decision makers was highlighted recently in a Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Disability Policy initiative. It funded the NGA's Center for Best Practices to conduct a two-year, cross-agency strategic planning initiative to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities, across the domains of health, education, workforce development, housing, mental health, and transportation in six states. Teams of gubernatorial appointees from each state undertook an effort to identify the barriers and propose strategic solutions to overcome them. In all six states the number one barrier was the need for better data sharing across agencies using common definitions and common identifiers of clients.

Another example comes from the GAO. In 2003, it identified disability policy as a high-risk area in need of modernization because Federal disability programs have not kept pace with the economic, medical, technological, and social changes in society. A panel of experts was convened in 2007 to identify steps that need to be taken to assist in achieving the needed modernization. Three focus areas were identified as needing attention: (1) what is working well and what needs improvement; (2) strengthening partnerships and coordination; and, (3) modernizing measures of success. Embedded in each of the three areas are issues centered on employment, including a specific next-step of action incorporating the need to focus on providing services to youth with disabilities, in order to help them transition into the workforce. Data challenges consistently emerged. To note a few: (1) too many varying definitions of disability; (2) even when the Federal Government requires data to be collected by state and local entities, the data is not required to be sent to the Federal Government; and, (3) the lack of multiple but common measures of success that focus on people, not just programs. GAO's concluding observation noted the need to develop clear and coordinated policies, and strong and meaningful partnerships between all stakeholders.<sup>39</sup>

There are steps being taken by the Federal Government to improve education data. One has been to make general education and special education reporting requirements compatible, a long frustration among researchers attempting to make comparisons between the two strands of education. Another is the support being provided to the states to fund longitudinal education data warehouses. Spurred on by the passage of No Child Left Behind and by the requirement for states to report educational progress by sub-groups, the ED has recently taken a series of necessary steps to substantially improve the quality of education data, long recognized as one of the most seriously flawed "systems" in the government. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has the lead responsibility for issuing the grants to state education departments for the design and implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems. The grants are to help the states generate and use accurate and timely data to meet reporting requirements, support decision-making, and aid education research. The three-year grants are authorized by the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002, and all 50 states are eligible. Two rounds of awards have been issued to date.

Another effort to improve the quality of data currently underway is the creation of the DQC (the previously mentioned Data Quality Campaign). With a small grant from the Gates Foundation, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO)/Just for Kids,

located in Texas, launched a collaborative effort composed of members of the key national education organizations, most of which have Gates Foundation funding. A primary purpose is to have a forum where the states and other stakeholders can come together to identify solutions to improve the quality of education information systems. Quality data collected overtime about what happens with each student has long been recognized as the key to improved information and accountability. NCEO serves as the convener and technical support to the states as they develop their information systems. Through this collaborative effort, a set of essential elements (standards of practice) have been identified to improve state capacity to monitor education outcomes and to connect the education data with other key state data systems. Several states are now involved in the second part of the effort—connecting to other systems—and the members have recognized that it is critical to move beyond the “silo” of education data and connect initially to three other systems: (1) child welfare; (2) post-secondary; and, (3) workforce development. Leaders of the Campaign recognize that disability data is one of the weakest links in the chain of information systems.

The Casey Family Foundation, also concerned about disability information, has already seen the value of connecting with this network of organizations. It is moving forward to join forces to develop connecting information systems between education and foster care systems.

The recommendation section will address a possible action plan.

#### **SECTION IV: RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations propose actions to be taken by a wide array of national organizations with a stake in high school reform efforts, as well as the Federal Government and foundations. The recommendations are geared towards strategies that will support reform within high schools, including charter and other alternative schools, in order to improve the transition process for youth and young adults as they move into adulthood. The overarching goal is that all youth will be capable of becoming productive members of the labor force and engaged in civic life. For youth at-risk, including youth with disabilities, a set of values and beliefs will drive the recommendations and include:

- Society should have the belief that all youth have the potential to achieve, if they are challenged by high expectations.
- Institutions have the responsibility to alter policies and practices, where practicable, that impede the provision of supports the youth may need to succeed.
- Success is possible if collaboration is developed among an array of youth-serving organizations, which crosses institutional boundaries and focuses on their achievement of the common goal of providing all youth with the tools necessary to succeed in society.
- Capacity can be built across a wide array of systems and institutions (in education and other systems) to assist youth in pursuing their own niche in the world of work and society.

Operationalizing these values and beliefs means that much must be changed in the way of doing business in schools and communities. Such a culture shift is not an easy thing to do. Collaboration will need to occur and action plans will need to be developed among a wide array of stakeholders in schools, districts, communities, multiple state agencies and state governing bodies, state and national advocacy and membership associations, multiple Federal Government agencies, federally funded research and technical assistance centers, and foundations. The Action sections of the recommendations identify the key actors that need to assume responsibility for moving the agenda forward. The recommendations are intended to be enhancements to the current infrastructure supporting high school and transition reform. The recommendations will not repeat the strategies that are already “in-play,” such as upgrading standards and aligning curriculum to the standards. Nor will alternative approaches be suggested to Federal policies, such as the decisions made regarding how to assess students with significant disabilities. There are well established mechanisms to deal with these issues. The recommendations are organized around the five categories discussed in the paper, and include three tiers: the first states the recommendation, the next suggests who should act and for most of the recommendations, and the third identifies what organizations can support the action.

### *Schooling*

The recommendations are based on the observations found in the research that teachers are not well-positioned to initiate instructional strategies or design curriculum, primarily due to the lack of time to access evidence-based materials and strategies. In order to address this finding, consistent in both generic and special education research, the recommendations are geared toward improving the infrastructure to support the school leaders and teachers in the classrooms. The recommendations also address strategies to ensure all teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to support the multiple learning styles of students. Furthermore, they also address the research-based finding that high schools need to establish connections within their communities in support of their high school reform initiatives, with a particular focus on assisting youth in meeting work-readiness goals.

The symposium participants strongly supported using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach as an instructional design strategy and in the development of curriculum. Although the literature review for this paper indicates there is not a commonly understood agreement about what the term implies, the recommendations that follow are intended to aggressively support expansion of UDL as a means to assist students and professionals involved in preparing them for the world beyond graduation:

**Recommendation 1:** Pre-service and in-service training programs for school personnel need to include the principles embedded in the UDL approach to instruction.

- *Who needs to act?* State boards of educations, post-secondary schools of education, and state licensure bodies that are responsible for certifying teachers all need to be involved in this process.



- *Who can support the action?* National associations [e.g., National Association State Boards of Education (NASBE), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)] should collaborate for the purpose of synthesizing the evidence-based research that states and districts can use to inform policy and practice decisions.

**Recommendation 2:** Major organizations involved in researching and evaluating high school reform initiatives, including both general and special education, should be convened to address the lack of available data about special education students in studies conducted of programs using gold standard evaluations.

- *Who needs to act?* The research organizations supported by the Federal Government to conduct large scale evaluations.
- *Who can support this action?* The American Education Research Association (AERA), and the federally funded research centers charged with the task of synthesizing research studies in general and special education can be asked to assist in this effort.

**Recommendation 3:** The Federal Government needs to ensure a common set of principles and definitions are applied for UDL.

- *Who needs to act?* The Institute for Education Sciences and other ED Offices need to review current principles and definitions applied by various researchers and providers of technical assistance funded by the Federal Government to promote common usage across multiple initiatives.

**Recommendation 4:** The organizations funded by the Federal Government and those contracted by the states to provide technical support to their high schools should use UDL instructional design strategies and in the development of curriculum.

- *Who needs to act?* The Federal Government would need to ensure centers that they fund fulfill the recommendation. A focus on the states could be supported by Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) in consultation with the National Association Secondary School Administrators (NASSA) and the High School Alliance to develop an action plan that supports infusion of UDL principles and strategies.
- *Who can support the action?* The U.S. Department of Education and foundations should assist in this action.

**Recommendation 5:** Multiple pathway strategies should be used in high schools to provide students with exposure to community and work-based learning opportunities and chances for coursework to occur through co-enrollment in post-secondary institutions for joint credit.

- *Who needs to act?* State departments of education should set the parameters for multiple pathways approaches based on consultation with post-secondary governing boards, and the state workforce development governing boards. At the local level, support should be sought from the Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) and the post-secondary institutions providing career and technical education in order to connect the multiple pathways to alternative schools and other second chance education and training programs.

- *Who can support the action?* CCSO, NASDSE, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), NASDCTE, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the High School Alliance and Achieve Inc. Also, national technical assistance organizations with expertise in one or more of the multiple pathways approaches referenced in this report can all support the restructuring of high schools. Due to the wide array of organizations noted, it is recommended that the first two entities mentioned act as initial conveners to develop an action plan.

**Recommendation 6:** Marginal policies and practices that too often result in youth dropping out, specifically suspension and temporary placements in alternative schools, should be reviewed and altered. (See section on *Creating Personalized Learning Environments*, page 21, for a discussion about this recommendation.).

- *Who needs to act?* State boards of education and school districts must take the lead for this action.
- *Who can support the action?* To support state boards in their decision-making process regarding alternatives to suspension, they can draw upon resources such as: Arizona State University’s Center on Suspension; and other organizations providing research and strategies for alternatives to suspension. For information about alternative schools, DOL’s Employment Training Administration (ETA) is currently supporting demonstrations, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), and the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools.

**Recommendation 7:** A community forum should be established to focus the array of community organizations to support high school reform efforts, and ensure compatible and reinforcing strategies are employed to assist students in the transition process—through a wide range of services including, but not limited to, exposure to the world of work, mentoring, community service, tutoring, etc.

- *Who needs to act?* School districts, mayors, and county commissioners need to be involved, depending on local governance arrangements.
- *Who can support the action?* At the national level, ODEP, in concert with ETA’s Youth Office and ED agencies, should sponsor a forum of youth development and workforce organizations to develop an action plan to assist high schools in the creation of a sustainable forum. The Coalition of Community Schools (CCS), the National League of Cities (NLC), the National Association of Counties (NACo), U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM), the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY), America’s Promise Alliance, the After School Alliance, the Corps Network, the United Way, and NYEC, along with representation from education organizations, such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), all can contribute to the fulfillment of this recommendation. The results of the action plan could be distributed throughout these networks.

## ***Assessment***

**Recommendation 8:** “Best practice” information briefs should be developed focusing on test-taking accommodations practices and distributed through Parent Information Centers funded by both NCLB and IDEA.

- *Who needs to act?* The PACER Center (the national technical assistance center for Parent, Training, & Information centers), CCSSO, NASDSE, and AASA should review the briefs.
- *Who can support the action?* The National Center on Education Outcomes (NCEO), which has among its duties the charge of supporting states in the development of accommodation policies and practices materials for youth with disabilities, can be tapped to prepare the briefs.

**Recommendation 9:** States should consider inclusion of an accessible work-readiness assessment as a part of the state accountability system, and include the results in report cards to the public.

- *Who needs to act?* A two tiered approach is suggested. The first is to convene a symposium, including representation from industry associations, experts in assessments, and representatives of state-based stakeholder organizations, to explore cost-effective strategies to include work-readiness assessments in state accountability systems. The second step would be centered on individual state action. Governors, state boards of education, and post-secondary education and state workforce development boards all need to be involved in the decision. The need for alternative assessments for some youth with disabilities, should be included as part of the decision making process. (See the section on *Workforce Focused Competencies* above, page 25, for discussion of the issue.)
- *Who can support the action?* For the first tier action, the Federal Government and foundations could support the preparation for and convening of the symposium. For the second tier, the following organizations can all assist the states in considering the options for this recommendation: the National Governors’ Association (NGA), Achieve Inc., CCSSO, NASDSE, and NASDCTE due to their work assisting states to improve the assessment system for career and technical education programs of study.

**Recommendation 10:** There is an increasing use of web-based assessments for high-stake tests used for determining individual performances for the purposes of education and/or certification credentials, and pre- and post-assessments within programs. However, there remain substantive questions regarding the adequacy of accommodations and accessibility of these web-based tests for persons with disabilities. Therefore there should be a review undertaken to document issues identified by consumers, and an action plan developed to ensure accommodations and accessibility are appropriate, through both policies of test sponsors and practices at test sites.

- *Who needs to act?* Federal agencies, charged with supporting persons with disabilities to help achieve success in education and training [e.g., ODEP and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)], should take the lead in documenting concerns from parents and persons with disabilities who have participated in web-based assessments, to establish a list of concerns and challenges test-takers have confronted. The second step would be to convene a symposium of stakeholders, including national oversight bodies, for credentialing organizations (e.g., American

National Standards Institute, National Commission for Certifying Agencies) and test-developers—to review the processes used to ensure the multiple needs of persons with disabilities have been addressed in the validation of test instruments and identification of appropriate accommodations.

- *Who can support the action* The American Psychological Association (APA), the organization responsible for issuing the national standards used by test-developers, AERA, and NCEO.

### ***Credentialing and Graduating Requirements***

It should be noted the participants in the first symposium strongly supported reducing the number of diploma options and ensuring youth with disabilities participate in general education courses, to the maximum extent possible, so they can graduate with standard diplomas based on rigorous standards.

**Recommendation 11:** A study of post-school outcomes centered on success in post-secondary education and the labor force for youth with disabilities who have not acquired a standard diploma to assess the effects of the specialized diplomas should be supported.

- *Who needs to act?* The Federal Government needs to make this a priority study.

**Recommendation 12:** Information briefs should be developed for parents to assist them in understanding the implications of escalating graduation requirements, and distributed through Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRC), funded through NCLB, and Parent Training Information Centers (PTI), funded through IDEA.

- *Who needs to act?* The PACER Center could be tasked to develop such briefs, and the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE), CCSO, and NASDSE should be reviewers of the draft documents.
- *Who can support the action?* NCEO and Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Minnesota, the primary authors of a major study about graduation requirements.

### ***Communities and Families***

The participants in the second symposium recognized that, in spite of legislative requirements for schools to engage families and communities, there is a substantial need to improve the capacity of schools to do so.

**Recommendation 13:** A network of organizations should join together to develop a set of goals and indicators that can be used by states and localities to measure the adequacy of family and community engagement. States should incorporate the indicators in state report cards to the public.

- *Who needs to act?* For the family side of the equation, PIRCs and PTIs, NCPIE, and the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) need to be represented. For the community side, the National League of Cities (NLC), NCY, America's Promise Alliance, the United Way, and the National Forum for Youth Investment should be represented. Representation from education needs to include organizations such as the

American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and NASSP. Each of these organizations can contribute to the fulfillment of this recommendation. The CCS could be asked to serve in a convening role.

- *Who can support the action?* CCS and the Federal Government and foundations need to support a process to identify the goals and indicators.

### ***The Data Dilemma***

**Recommendation 14:** A panel of experts knowledgeable about data challenges should be convened to develop a cross-agency action plan for the purpose of improving disability and non-disability data in order to assess progress in school and post-school outcomes.

- *Who should act?* ODEP in collaboration with the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) should jointly convene the panel, which includes Federal agencies responsible for data collection, to develop an action plan to substantially improve the collection of quality data—through administrative records, longitudinal studies, improvement in definitions, etc.—with an emphasis on relationships to the data sharing among systems.
- *Who can support the action?* Representatives from the DQC, NGA, other Federal agencies, and the Gates and Casey Foundations should be asked to participate.

### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> The primary sources for statistics, unless otherwise noted, in the paper are from the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2). NLTS2 is a federally funded national survey of youth with disabilities designed, in part, to develop consistent and reliable data regarding classification of disabilities, and provide socio-economic information on the families and youth of this sub-population. Both of these core sources of information track children and youth that have been certified as needing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). There are recognized inconsistencies in the identification and classification processes among states and even schools within the same district. The NLTS2 data is available online at [www.nlts2.org](http://www.nlts2.org). NCES data is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/>.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie, L.K., Hurlburt, M.S., Landsverk, J., Rolls, J.A., Wood, P.A., & Kelleher, K.J. (2003) in National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2007). *Negotiating the Curves Toward Employment: A Guide About Youth Involved in the Foster Care System*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership.

<sup>3</sup> Swenson, S. (2004). *Young Americans with Disabilities*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> Rouse, C.E. (2005). *The Labor Market Consequences of an Inadequate Education*. Presented at The Campaign for Educational Equity's Fall 2005 Symposium on "The Social Costs of Inadequate Education."

<sup>5</sup> Chait, R., Housman, N., Muller, R., & Goldware, S. (2007, March). *Academic Interventions to Help Students Meet Rigorous Standards*. Washington, DC: National High School Alliance, Institute for Educational Leadership.

<sup>6</sup> Oakes, J. & Saunders, M. (n.d). *Multiple Perspectives on Multiple Pathways*. University of California, Los Angeles..

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- <sup>7</sup> Raywid, M.A. (1994) *Alternative Schools: The State of the Art. Educational Leadership*, 52(1), 26-31. In Aron, L. (2006). *An Overview of Alternative Education*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
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- <sup>9</sup> The National High School Center has produced a series of Information Briefs that are available online at [www.betterhighschools.org](http://www.betterhighschools.org)
- <sup>10</sup> Access to the Center for What Works in Transition: Systemic Review Project studies are posted on the National Post School Outcomes Center and go to the Resources and Publications
- <sup>11</sup> The reports from the CSRQ Center and the Access Center are available online at [www.betterhighschools.org](http://www.betterhighschools.org).
- <sup>12</sup> Browder, D.M., & Cooper-Duffy, K. (October 2003). *Evidence-Based Practices for Students with Severe Disabilities and the Requirement for Accountability in "No Child Left Behind."* The Journal of Special Education, 37(3), 157-163.
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- <sup>14</sup> Morocco, C.C., Aguilar, C.M., Clay, K., Brigham, N., & Zigmond, N. (2006) *Good High Schools for Students with Disabilities*. Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 21(3), 139.
- <sup>15</sup> See Center on Education and Work at the University of Wisconsin website at [www.cew.wisc.edu](http://www.cew.wisc.edu).
- <sup>16</sup> Blackorby & Wagner; Colley & Jamison (1998); Kohler (1993); Kohler & Rush (1995); Luecking & Fabian (2000); Mooney & Scholl (2004); Morningstar (1997); Rogan (1997); and Wehman (1996).
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- <sup>27</sup> Career Clusters' website provides detailed information on the 16 clusters including the job families contained in each cluster. Visit [www.careerclusters.org/](http://www.careerclusters.org/).
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