Improving High School Outcomes for All Youth: Recommendations for Policy & Practice

At long last, resolving critical challenges of the high school years has become a top public policy priority nationwide. High school is in the spotlight due to persistent concerns about high dropout rates, low achievement scores, and a lack of college- and career-readiness among high school graduates. At the national level, policy makers have established various high school focused grant programs, including the High School Graduation Initiative and Small Learning Communities, sponsored numerous pieces of high school legislation, and prioritized secondary school policies in debates surrounding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, reauthorized in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act). Meanwhile, the majority of states are focused on improving school outcomes by establishing common internationally benchmarked standards for English/language arts and mathematics for kindergarten through grade 12 as a part of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Supported by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and led by 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia, the Common Core State Standards Initiative aims to ensure that all students in the same grade level nationwide, regardless of their home state, learn the same concepts and skills. While each state is determining individually how to implement and assess student knowledge based on the standards, most are collaborating on the development of improved common assessments. For the first time, high schools in those states using the new common assessment tools will use 12th-grade tests.

Secondary school policies and practices warrant national attention because high school outcomes have a significant impact on students’ ability to successfully transition into productive adulthood, postsecondary education, and employment. Unfortunately, many students experience difficulties before and during high school that prevent them from obtaining a high school diploma. Other students graduate only to discover they are ill-prepared to enter the workplace and/or pursue postsecondary education.

Students struggle during secondary school for various reasons including low literacy skills, being a non-native English learner, and poor school attendance due to involvement in the foster care system, court-involvement, homelessness, or other life challenges. For some students, academic and other difficulties in school are caused by identified or unidentified disabilities. A estimated 13 percent of all secondary school students receive federally funded special education, not accounting for those students with undiagnosed disabilities (see Table 1 for more facts about students with disabilities).

Due to increasing diversity among the high school student population – in both their characteristics and their needs – various reforms to high school policies and practices are needed to improve the high school outcomes of all students, including youth with disabilities and other diverse learners and disconnected youth. Regardless of disability status or other classification, research indicates that all students need the same essential educational and developmental opportunities to ensure their success in adulthood. To ensure all students have equal access to the same opportunities in life, public systems and service strategies must include additional support services for those individuals with high support needs.

With a clear focus on the dual goals of college and career readiness for all, policy makers and education leaders nationwide must now determine how to equip all secondary schools and teachers to effectively engage and support today’s diverse students to achieve both goals.
As they proceed with secondary school policy reforms, policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels should prioritize the following four objectives:

1) Use common graduation requirements and limit diploma options.
2) Further adoption of universal design for learning.
3) Improve educator professional development and support infrastructure.
4) Ensure appropriate accommodations and accessibility of assessments.

Table 1. Facts on High School Students with Disabilities

About Students with Disabilities

- An estimated 13 percent of all secondary school students received federally funded special education services during the 2008-2009 school year; this estimate does not account for secondary students with undiagnosed disabilities (U.S. Department of Education 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).
- Over half of all students with disabilities participate in the general education program alongside peers without disabilities at least 80 percent of the time they are in school (Swanson, 2008).
- Students who receive special education display a broad spectrum of conditions that range from learning disabilities to visual and hearing impairments to emotional disturbances. The severity of those conditions and the extent to which they impact an individual student’s ability to learn in school also vary considerably, both across and within particular disability classifications.

High School Outcomes

- Students with disabilities have a high school dropout rate that is twice that of students without disabilities according to available data1 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, in NASET, 2005).
- Seventy-three (73) percent of students with disabilities score below basic on national assessments compared to 25 percent of students without disabilities (Swanson, 2008).

Employment Outcomes

- Only 21.1 percent of people with disabilities ages 16 and older were in the labor force in May 2011 compared to 69.7 percent of people without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

1Historically inconsistent data collection and reporting practices across states make it impossible to accurately describe the high school outcomes of students with disabilities at this time (recently enacted national performance reporting requirements are expected to produce accurate estimates in the coming years).
Use Common Graduation Requirements and Limit Diploma Options

Common standards for all students simultaneously raise expectations of what any student can achieve and impel educators to address differences in how students learn and demonstrate competencies. States’ ongoing implementation of increasingly rigorous graduation requirements have led more schools to implement alternative diploma options which are most often intended for students with disabilities. Many school systems have developed alternative high school credentials to address questions about what will happen if a student fails to meet the minimum requirements for earning a standard diploma, including failing to pass high school exit exams (currently required in 28 states).

Unfortunately, alternative diploma options can exacerbate the challenges students with disabilities and other struggling students frequently face following high school. Because alternative credentials are typically granted to students who earn fewer credits, score lower on performance exams, or otherwise fail to achieve on a level similar to their peers, they typically lack credibility in the eyes of employers and postsecondary institutions. Subsequently, students who earn an alternative credential may find it more difficult to obtain a job or enter the postsecondary institution of their choice. While they may placate critics who argue that increasing the rigor of graduation requirements could increase school dropout rates, alternative credentials may unintentionally lead students and their parents to set their sights low and forgo efforts to achieve the more credible standard diploma option.

In the absence of research evidence regarding the effects that alternative credentials may have on the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities and other struggling students, advocates for students caution schools and states against using them.

Actions for Federal Policy Makers

Because little is known about the possible effects of receiving alternative diplomas and credentials on students following high school, the federal government should support a study of post-school outcomes centered on success in postsecondary education and the labor force for youth with disabilities and other students who have not acquired a standard diploma.

Further the Adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

All students are best served by school policies and practices that maximize their opportunities to learn and master the common standards-based course content in a manner that this personalized to their learning style and support needs. Using universal design for learning principles, many schools are discovering cost effective ways to tailor instruction to individual student needs in the general education classroom.

Universal design for learning (UDL) is an approach that addresses the needs of all kinds of learners and learning styles by using:

- multiple means of representation, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
- multiple means of expression, to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know; and,
- multiple means of engagement, to tap into learners’ interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation.

UDL is an outgrowth of universal design (UD)—“the design of products and environments to be usable by all
people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Center for Universal Design, 1997). Rather than designing facilities and services for the average user, UD involves designing them for people with a broad range of abilities, disabilities, ages, reading levels, learning styles, native languages, cultures, and other characteristics. The intent of UD is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by more people at little or no extra cost. The same principle applies to universal design for learning, by which the curricula and instructional strategies that schools and teachers use enable as many students as possible, if not all, to participate and learn together and individually with little to no assistive technology.

Actions for State and Local Policy Makers
As states develop their implementation plans for the Common Core State Standards and common assessments, each state should incorporate comprehensive planning for implementation of universal design for learning principles and strategies. These plans should call upon state and local education systems to take the following steps to increase adoption of UDL:

- Include training in principles and strategies of universal design for learning in required pre-service and in-service training programs for school personnel (for examples of instructional practices that follow UDL principles, see: http://www.udlcenter.org/implementation/examples).
- Use funding for educational technology to purchase and implement universally designed educational technology.

Actions for Federal Policy Makers
Universal design for learning (UDL) is already recognized by federal legislation, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the Higher Education Opportunity (HEO) Act of 2008, as an important approach to instruction in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions. As Congress prepares to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), federal policy makers need to further the adoption of UDL by:

- Adopting the HEO Act’s definition and set of principles for UDL, including definitions pertaining to educational technology and assessments, in the reauthorized ESEA.
- Promoting adoption of UDL principles and strategies in pre-service and in-service training programs for all educators nationwide.
- Requiring any federally funded technical assistance provider, curriculum developers, and common assessment developers to follow UDL principles in the development and use of curricular goals, teaching methods, instructional materials, and assessments and encourage UDL’s use by all others conducting similar activities.
- Establishing a federal competitive grant program to transform existing practices to reflect the UDL framework in the following areas: standards, instructional methods, curriculum, accountability/assessment systems, and professional development; and funding evaluation and dissemination of lessons from the grantees.

Improve Educator Professional Development & Support Infrastructure
When it comes to improving instruction for all students, training and professional development for teachers and school administrators cannot be overstressed; however, the education system’s infrastructure must adequately support well-trained teachers and school leaders to ensure their effectiveness in the classroom. Too often, teachers lack the time to access evidence-based materials and strategies that meet the varied needs of their students (see Table 2 for details on evidence-based instructional strategies). Therefore, improving teacher effectiveness will require a two pronged strategy that consists of: 1) training all teachers in evidence-based instructional strategies; and 2) adequately supporting teachers through reforms to the infrastructure.

Actions for State and Local Policy Makers
State and local education systems should ensure all educators have the training and support they need to be more effective in teaching diverse learners by:

- Training all general and special educators in evidence-based instructional strategies for teaching all students the common standards-based general education curriculum using flexible and
differentiated assignments and materials tailored to individual student needs.

- Training all school administrators on the same evidence-based instructional strategies and methods for supporting teachers.

- Building time into teachers’ regular schedules to collaborate with one another, especially among special education and subject matter teachers.

- Providing teachers with universally designed educational technology and associated training and technical assistance.

- Adopting school-wide interventions such as Check and Connect and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) that personalize the learning environment and reduce behavioral challenges that interfere with learning.

### Actions for Federal Policy Makers

The federal government should promote improvements in educator professional development and support infrastructure nationwide by:

- Increasing support in the key federal education initiatives, including teacher quality programs, for evidence-based training for general and special educators in how to effectively teach diverse learners, including students with disabilities, and co-teaching strategies.

- Including a demonstrated ability to teach diverse learners, including students with disabilities, in the federal definition of a highly qualified teacher or an effective teacher and associated performance assessments.

- Promoting collaboration among national associations (e.g., National Association of State Boards of Education, Council of Chief State School Officers, and National Association of State Directors of Special Education) on synthesizing the evidence-based research that states and districts can use to inform policy and practice decisions about pre-service and in-service training.


### Table 2. Evidence-based Instructional Strategies

The Center for What Works in Transition, which reviews special education analyses to identify evidence-based practices, summarizes research findings that indicate post-school outcomes among secondary students with disabilities may be improved through the use of mnemonic instruction, technology-based interventions, visual display interventions, self-management interventions, and peer-assistance interventions. Learn more at: [http://nsttac.appstate.edu/content/academic-evidence-based-practice-descriptions](http://nsttac.appstate.edu/content/academic-evidence-based-practice-descriptions).

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services’ (OSERS) *Tool Kit on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities*, [http://www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/index.asp](http://www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/index.asp), highlights 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 Access Center, a national technical assistance center funded by OSERS, provides guidance to states and local schools on how to help students with disabilities effectively learn in the general education curriculum. Recommended instructional strategies for teaching students with disabilities include: mnemonics, graphic organizers, concrete representational-abstract approach, differentiated instruction, and computer-assisted instruction. For guidance on implementing these practices, see: [http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/programsandpractices.asp](http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/programsandpractices.asp).
Ensure Appropriate Accommodations & Accessibility of Assessments

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997, schools must include special education students in state and district assessments. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 further increased school accountability for special education students by requiring states to annually assess reading and math proficiency of most students with disabilities using the same tests and performance standards as those applied to the general student population. Alternative assessments and modified performance standards for the students’ current grade level are permissible for up to two percent of students while another one percent of students – those with the most significant disabilities – may be assessed based on less-than-grade-level standards (Swanson, 2008). The U. S. Department of Education recently announced its intention to move away from the so called “two percent rule.” This issue will be central to ESEA reauthorization debates regarding student assessment.

Under NCLB, schools are required to provide appropriate assessment accommodations to any student with a disability who needs some form of accommodation in order to participate in the required testing. The student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team determines what if any accommodations the student needs to participate in the assessment. Some common types of testing accommodations are: providing more time to complete questions; conducting the assessment in an alternative setting; allowing more frequent breaks or otherwise adjusting the assessment schedule; altering the way the assessment content is presented to the student (for example, reading questions aloud to a student who has a visual disability); and altering the means by which students can respond to questions (for example, allowing a student who cannot write to answer questions orally or using computer technology).

To appropriately accommodate students with disabilities, school personnel and IEP team members, including students and families, need to understand how and when to provide certain types of assessment accommodations while guarding against altering the content of the assessment. If they are not knowledgeable and careful in making accommodations, school personnel may alter the underlying knowledge or skill (the construct) the student is supposed to demonstrate through the assessment. If the construct is changed in the process of altering the assessment method, students’ assessment results will not be comparable to students who did not receive an accommodation.

An additional concern about current assessment practices is the increasing use of technology-based assessments. Substantive questions remain about the adequacy of accommodations and accessibility of these technology-based tests for persons with disabilities. For a fuller discussion of considerations regarding technology-based assessments and accommodations, see publications by the National Center on Educational Outcomes at: http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/recent.html.

Actions for State and Local Policy Makers

To ensure that schools appropriately use assessment accommodations, state and local education systems need to:

- Provide all teachers and school administrators with training on test-taking accommodations for both paper-and-pencil and technology-based assessments. Training should be based on current knowledge of best practices for accommodations.
- Provide students and families with information and training on accommodations options to enable them to make informed decisions about accommodations during assessment.
- Provide opportunities for students to use technology-based platforms and tools in the classroom before they use them to take assessments.
- Collect and use feedback from students and families about how different accommodations work to inform decisions about accommodation policies and procedures.

Actions for Federal Policy Makers

Federal policy makers should support improvements in the use of assessment accommodations and ensure newly developed assessments are fully accessible for all students by:

- Supporting the development and dissemination of information on best practices in test-taking accommodations. Guidance on best practices should be targeted to families and school counselors as well as any school personnel.
involved in IEP development and assessment administration.

- Conducting a review and documenting issues identified by consumers while using web-based assessments and developing a strategy to ensure the policies of test sponsors and the practices at testing sites address assessment accommodations and accessibility appropriately.

Conclusion

Improving the high school outcomes of all students is critical for improving their transition into productive adulthood, postsecondary education, and employment. In order to achieve the dual goals of college and career readiness for all, policy makers and education leaders must prioritize improving secondary school policies and practices in ways that will ensure today’s diverse students are effectively engaged and supported throughout high school. Policy makers can accomplish this by using common graduation requirements and limiting diploma options; furthering the adoption of universal design for learning; improving educator professional development and support infrastructure; and ensuring appropriate accommodations and accessibility of assessments.

For more details on the recommendations in this policy brief, see the following publications written by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth and others:

- **Preparing All Youth for Academic and Career Readiness: Implications for High School Policy and Practice** (2008), a white paper by Joan Wills. National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Institute for Educational Leadership.

- **Preparing General Education Teachers to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities** (2011), a white paper by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD).

- **Universal Design for Learning Guidelines Version 2.0** (2011), a resource developed by CAST.

- **Don’t Forget Accommodations: Five Questions to Ask When Moving to Technology-based Assessments** (2011), a brief by the National Center on Educational Outcomes.

References


The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Information Brief was written by Mindy Larson. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This Information Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-16519-07-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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