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Outcomes in Special Education: *What We Know and How We Could Know More*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At legislative direction in the 1994 Supplemental Appropriations Act, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy is assessing the feasibility of doing a longitudinal study of educational outcomes for students in special education. A longitudinal study allows the tracking of a population over some period of time in order to document changes in that population. Conducting such a study in the field of K-12 education will be complicated and costly. In Washington State, we have had only limited experience with this approach.

This report provides a summary of what is known from the research literature on outcomes for special education students who graduate from high school in the U.S. and in Washington State. Professor Eugene Edgar and his associates at the College of Education/Experimental Education Unit of the University of Washington have carried out path-breaking research in this area over the past decade. For the Institute project, they have summarized their research on high school graduates from three school districts in Washington and national research on educational outcomes for such graduates.

What Are Outcomes for the Nation?

- **School Completion:** Special education students graduate from high school at a rate lower than their non-disabled peers. While the graduation rate for all students is 83 %, the rate is 66 % for students with learning disabilities and 48 % for students with behavior disabilities.
- **Employment:** Five years after graduation from high school, employment rates are comparable for graduates with learning disabilities (71 %) and non-disabled students (69 %), but lower for students with behavior disabilities (47 %).
- **Independent Living:** Five years after high school graduation, fewer learning disabled (44 %) and behaviorally disabled (40 %) graduates are living independently from their parents than are their non-disabled peers (60 %).
- **Postsecondary Education: Attendance.** Five years after high school graduation, fewer learning disabled and behaviorally disabled (30 % each) graduates have attended postsecondary education or training programs than have their non-disabled peers (68 %).
- **Other Patterns:** Apart from these outcomes, very little is known about the progress of special education students **during** their school years. Some information is available on where students receive their education; more students every year receive their education in regular classrooms.

What Are Outcomes for Washington State? From research on student outcomes from three school districts in Washington State, the following is known:

- Students with learning and behavior disabilities **graduate** from high school at rates lower than those for non-disabled students: 60 % and 50 % respectively, compared to 81 % for non-disabled students.
- **Employment** rates, 5 years after high-school graduation, are comparable for learning disabled and non-disabled graduates (79 % and 78 %), but lower for those with behavior disabilities (43 %).
- **Independent Living** rates, 5 years after high school graduation, are 66 % for non-disabled, 64 % for those with learning disabilities and 71 % for those with behavior disabilities. These patterns for special education graduates are higher than those for the nation.
- **Postsecondary education** attendance rates, 5 years after high school graduation, are 92 % for non-disabled, 71 % for those with behavior disabilities, and 63 % for those with learning disabilities. These patterns for special education graduates are higher than those for the nation, possibly reflecting the metropolitan nature of these school districts.
- **Other Patterns:** Postsecondary attendance rates are relatively high, although postsecondary graduation rates are substantially lower. Special education graduates are more likely to be enrolled in vocational and community college programs; their non-disabled peers are more likely to be enrolled in four-year institutions.

Options for further study: If work were to begin on a longitudinal system for collecting information on special education outcomes, the University of Washington team suggests these directions:

- Any system for assessing outcomes in special education should be part of an educational data system for the entire K-12 system.
- Any such system should:
 - collect data at the school district level.
 - summarize data at regional and state levels.
 - follow cohorts of students *over time* (longitudinal).
 - collect basic demographic student data.
 - collect data on types of educational services provided.
 - measure and assess student achievement regularly.
 - monitor school completion rates.
 - track post-school outcomes for 5 years.