

PACE Special Education Webinar Series: Summary and Q&A

Webinar #1: Transitions into and out of Special Education

February 27, 2020

Introduction

How are California students with disabilities being identified and served, and what could be improved? On Thursday, February 27, 2020, PACE hosted the first webinar in a three-webinar series addressing these important questions. This is a summary of the webinar and includes presenter responses to audience questions that arose in the webinar.

In this first webinar, researchers from the [PACE Policy Research Panel on Special Education: Organizing Schools to Serve Students with Disabilities](#) presented studies that related to the transitions that children make into, between, and out of special education identification and services in California. Ideally, students with disabilities would experience a coherent continuum of care that identifies student needs and guides students to the support they need when they need it. Instead, research shows that students in California too often experience missed or late identification of needs, and that kids and families are lost between the confusing and burdensome cracks in the process. Researchers on this webinar described critical points of transition for students with disabilities and offered recommendations for improvement.

The webinar presenters on the panel included the following researchers, who together spanned research on students with disabilities from infancy to post-secondary transitions.

- Nancy Hunt, Professor Emerita, Cal State Los Angeles, and Discipline Director, Special Education, California Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities: [Identifying Young Children for Early Intervention in California](#).
- Connie Kasari, Professor of Psychological Studies in Education and Psychiatry, UCLA: [The Transition to Preschool for Children with Disabilities](#)
- Carolynne Beno, Assistant Superintendent, Yolo County Office of Education: [Students with Disabilities in the CORE Districts: Characteristics, Outcomes and Transitions](#) and [Promoting Successful Transitions for Students with Disabilities](#)
- Lauren Lindstrom, Professor and Dean of the School of Education, UC Davis: [Promoting Successful Transitions for Students with Disabilities](#)
- Fred McFarlane, Professor Emeritus, San Diego State University; and Mari Guillermo, Project Coordinator, San Diego State University: [Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities](#)

Identifying Young Children for Early Intervention in California

Nancy Hunt presented the findings from her policy brief, [Identifying Young Children for Early Intervention in California](#).

Key findings

The difference that early intervention can make for children with disabilities is well established:

- Intervention can reduce developmental delays and lessen the adverse developmental effects of risk factors and disabilities.
- Intervention is more effective when begun early.
- Effective early screening and assessment systems can result in earlier provision of intervention services.

However, not all eligible children are not receiving early intervention. Hunt cited a national study by Rosenberg and colleagues in which only 10 percent of children *with delays* were receiving services. And in California, the percentage of children 0-3 years old receiving early intervention services is lower than the national average.

Students are lost in between the cracks in the steps in the process. A child must first be screened by a professional (e.g. a pediatrician). After a failed screen, the child must be referred, undergo intake, receive a multidisciplinary evaluation, be determined eligible, and finally, receive services. A study by Kavanaugh and colleagues found that of 1034 children who were screened, only 24 received services. At every step along the way there is fallout of children and families from the process.

A report by the Legislative Analyst's Office found five major reasons why some eligible children do not receive early intervention services:

- Children do not receive regular physician checkups.
- Physicians do not consistently screen children for developmental challenges.
- Physicians do not refer all potentially eligible children for formal evaluations
- Parents do not follow through on physicians' referrals
- Parents who try to follow through on referrals become discouraged before their children receive services

Recommendations

California must unify and expand its system of collecting data on our children. Agencies that serve children must create or strengthen their interagency agreements and develop explicit procedures for serving children when their needs overlap. A more unified system would lessen the drop off in follow-up that occurs when children move across systems. Developing supports for families in following through on referrals could increase referrals and rates of eventual receipt of services. The Massachusetts Pregnancy to Early Life Longitudinal (PELL) Data System could serve as a model of how linking data systems to better track and identify young children can improve services for children who need them. An example of an effort in our state to accomplish these goals is [Help Me Grow](#), a national program currently implemented by First 5 California and First 5 LA.

The Transition to Preschool for Children with Disabilities

Connie Kasari presented on her policy brief, [The Transition to Preschool for Children with Disabilities](#), which she co-authored with Amanda Dimachkie and Maria Pizzano.

Key Findings

In California, children birth to 3 years of age who are identified with developmental delays or disabilities receive services administered through the Department of Developmental (these are called “Part C services” under IDEA). When those children turn 36 months old, they can receive services administered through the Department of Education (these are called “Part B services” under IDEA), if they meet the eligibility criteria under the Department of Education. 2.9 percent of infants/toddlers received Part C services and 5.4 percent of preschoolers received Part B services in California in 2016. The different agencies have different eligibility criteria, which lead to differences in eligibility – for example, only 1.8 percent of children who received Part C services were clearly eligible for Part B services. The low eligibility rates for Part B services, and the failure to make timely transitions from Part C to Part B services has put California under federal watch for not meeting compliance standards.

How children transition between Part C services to Part B services is an area of concern because obstacles in the transition can disrupt essential services for vulnerable children at a critical point in their development. Unfortunately, California falls below national averages in identifying and serving infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and California is under-identifying children in every racial and ethnic category.

Recommendations

California could implement a number of approaches to improve the transition into preschool for students with disabilities. California would benefit from a centralized screening and child tracking system that assigns one ID to track services received and for tracking students within and across systems. Greater interagency collaboration could help smooth the transition to preschool for young children with disabilities. Other states have reduced the barriers to transitioning between Part C and Part B services by assigning one agency to lead the administration of services for both infant/toddlers and preschoolers. In addition, in contrast to California’s current approach of transitioning children when they turn three, which can be chaotic for the system to keep up with, other states have designated a couple access periods during the year for children to make the transition from Part C to Part B services (e.g. February and October). Improving the workforce is also critical improving this transition; more special educators who are trained to work with young children with disabilities are essential, as is better training in cultural sensitivity. Increasing the cultural and linguistic match between teachers and families we are trying to serve should also be a goal. Also key to improving the transition to preschool for students with disabilities is ensuring that the transition process is begun very early. And finally, a data monitoring system for tracking progress is essential, as we currently have very little information about how well children with disabilities are doing as they transition into and through different systems.

Students with Disabilities in the CORE Districts: Characteristics, Outcomes and Transitions

Carolynne Beno presented findings on transitions of students with disabilities in K-12 schools based on her policy brief, "[Students with Disabilities in the CORE Districts: Characteristics, Outcomes and Transitions](#)," which she co-authored with Kevin Gee and Joe Witte.

Key Findings

The highest entry rates into special education in K-12 occur between kindergarten and fourth grade, where between 2.1 and 2.5 percent of students enter special education. Less than 1 percent of students enter special education while in high school, where we see the lowest entry rates. While there is an overall downward trend in special education entry rates from 2nd through 12th grades, the percentage of students entering special education slightly increases at key transition points, that is, after the elementary to middle school and middle to high school transitions, and in 12th grade, when students are preparing to matriculate into postsecondary opportunities

Exit rates between grades remain relatively constant from kindergarten through fourth grade, where about 25 percent of students who had an IEP in the prior year exited special education. There is a sharp decline in the percentage of students exiting special education between fifth and seventh grades, where the lowest percentage (8 percent) of students are exiting in seventh grade. The highest exit rates occur in 8th through 12th grades, where about one third of SWD exit special education between each grade level.

The study also examined patterns of transition between categories for students with speech or language impairments and emotional disturbance, and transitions for students with 504 plans.

Recommendations

Transitions for students with disabilities can be particularly disruptive. It is thus important to ensure continuity and stability of their educational experiences to promote these students' continued learning, growth, and development.

Promoting Successful Post-School Transitions for Students with Disabilities

Lauren Lindstrom and Carolynne Benno presented on their policy brief, "[Promoting Successful Transitions for Students with Disabilities](#)."

Key Findings

Post-school outcomes for students with disabilities lag behind those for nondisabled peers. Students with disabilities are less likely to graduate from high school, more likely to enroll in community colleges or short-term vocational programs, less likely to enroll in 4 year colleges or university, and are often employed in low-wage, poverty-level jobs

There are a number of predictors that will improve these outcomes that have been verified over time by numbers of different studies. Four key predictors include the following:

- *Family involvement:* Students are more likely to complete high school and go on to some kind of employment or post-secondary education if parents are involved as role models and advocates for students' lifelong goals.
- *Work based learning:* If a young person with a disability has the opportunity to work while they're in high school, they are much more likely to be employed as an adult, and this work could be through a range of different kinds of work experiences.
- *Inclusion:* The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings is predictive of better outcomes. Inclusion has been shown to impact all sorts of different outcomes from absences to better on-time graduation rates to higher rates of college attendance and employment.
- *Interagency Collaboration:* When local organizations get together and provide coordinated planning and formalize agreements to support students and families, outcomes improve for students.

Recommendations

- *Home-School Partnerships:* Schools can invite parents to be partners in the transition planning process; provide information about transition services and post-school options, and refer families to other resources, such as Parent Training and Information Centers.
- *Work-Based Learning:* Schools can provide opportunities for career exploration; encourage students with disabilities to engage in career related learning available for all youth; and facilitate work experiences during high school
- *Enhance Inclusion in General Education:* Schools can provide staff with professional learning and coaching; leverage existing general education initiatives designed to boost college and career readiness; and develop meaningful family engagement activities.
- *Improving Interagency Collaboration:* Schools can partner with agencies supporting a student prior to their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting (with family/student permission); create community resource maps to assist families and youth with navigating the post-secondary transition process; and get involved with their region's Local Partnership Agreement (LPA) team.

Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities

Fred McFarlane and Mari Guillermo presented findings from their brief, [Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities](#).

Key Findings

Work-based learning is important for every student because it prepares students for the expectations of adult life, links academic and functional learning, diversifies learning experiences and identifies choices, and expands life experiences beyond family and K-12 education. When students with disabilities are told that employment is not a viable options for them, preparation for employment post-school does not become part of the planning process.

Three essential actions that can improve work-based learning opportunities for students with disabilities include the following: (1) Strengthen expectations for each student, (2) Leverage opportunities for each students, and (3) Integrate supports for each student to strengthen their access and success.

Recommendations

- 1) Introduce careers and work to students at an early age (middle school or younger)
- 2) Require inclusion of students with disabilities in local career development programs and hold LEAs accountable through performance measures
- 3) Integrate students with disabilities in the State CTE Plan with explicit performance and outcome measures
- 4) Incorporate student participation in community-based service learning and work experiences in the CA School Dashboard indicator for college/career readiness
- 5) Build flexibility for LEAs to align programs and funding with students' needs – not with “siloes” funding categories
- 6) Meet students' needs through structured collaboration and resources across LEAs, postsecondary education, community partners and employers
- 7) Apply the K-12 Strong Workforce Program (SWP) framework, metrics and accountability with students with disabilities

Webinar Q&A

Panelists' Responses to Audience Questions from PACE Webinar: Transitions into and out of Special Education

Q1. Can you address the changes in the Early Intervention and Regional Center system regarding the exclusion of services for young children identified as being "at-risk" as these are not directly funded through ADA Part C?

Nancy Hunt: During the 2008 recession Regional Center put children considered "at risk" on monitoring status, and did not provide them with direct services. They have now moved away from that, and many regional centers are providing services for children at risk. It's hard to make a blanket statement, though, since each regional center tweaks the requirements in a slightly different way.

Q2. Why is there an emphasis on "special" preschools for ages 3-5. Shouldn't we be doing more to ensure that at every stage, from infant-toddler to preschoolers are getting their ECE in fully inclusive settings?

Nancy Hunt: Yes, children should be experiencing early childhood education in inclusive settings, however, there are simply not enough Head Start/state preschool/public school preschools to meet the need.

Q3. Can you clarify, is there data on children who received Part C services and then not to Part B but become eligible later in school meaning they likely were not ready to transition out of overall services?

Connie Kasari: We do not know the answer to this question. Because children are not given identifiers we would not know if and when children re-enter the system, arguing for coming up with a system that gives every child a unique identifier that follows them throughout school.

Q4. So under the state and federal disability laws, there is an obligation for preschools serving all children to provide those accommodations, and to allow for services to support the child in an inclusive environment to be provided on site. The preschools are not generally overbooked, and children with disabilities have first preference to be served. Millions of dollars for preschools were left on the table last year.

Nancy Hunt: If you are referring to public preschools, yes they must provide services and accommodations. I'm not familiar with the budget issues as you are ("Millions of dollars for preschools were left on the table last year") but here in LA County the preschools are often full. But you're right, it's a big complicated question, and because we're talking about services provided by different agencies without much coordination, we may not be using funds efficiently. See <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/early-childhood-education-california> for more.

Q5. How can we gain access to funding for preschool services in our districts?

Nancy Hunt: This report by Paul Warren and Laura Hill from Getting Down to Facts II describes some of the problems with preschool funding for students with disabilities in California. Some of these have been addressed by this year's state budget, but we don't know about your situation to give you a direct answer.

Q6. Can you speak to how issues with the over representation of African American students in the ED category and issues, particularly in CA, with access to eligibilities such as ID for African American students are being addresses by current policy?

Nancy Hunt: This is also an important issue that I don't know enough on to remark on, sorry to say.

Q7: I thought HS students who work during school have lower college graduation rates, is the research for the employment programs you mentioned reflective of increased post secondary graduation rates?

Fred McFarlane and Mari Guillermo: The data we cited referred to participants in California's Promoting the Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (CaPROMISE). A total of 3,273 youth ages 14-16 years old enrolled in the program between August, 2015 –April, 2016 with 1,646 youth randomly assigned to the treatment group. One of the primary objectives for the program was the expectation that 100% of the youth in the treatment group would have two work experiences, of which 1 must be paid. At the end of the program, 95% of the active participants had at least 1 work experience and 89% had at least 1 paid work experience. Additionally, by the end of the program, 79% of the youth had exited high school and only 27 had dropped out. When we examined the relation between type of exit (diploma or certificate of completion) and number of work experiences, youth who exited with a high school diploma had an average of 2.98 work experiences and those who exited with a certificate of completion had an average of 3.03 work experience. The difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. Feedback received from school staff, parents, and youth indicated that participation in work experience while in high school was a major factor, incentive, and motivator to stay in school. We have not seen anything in the literature that work experience negatively impact high school or college graduation.

Lauren Lindstrom: The research I was referring to is similar to the studies that Fred cites above. In a study of youth with disabilities in Oregon we found that students who participated in work experience during high school were more likely to graduate from high school with a regular diploma and more likely to be employed after graduation. We did not study the relationship between work experience and college enrollment and persistence.

Q8. I may have missed, but are there any exemplary schools in California that are using best practices along with full inclusion strategies and experiencing positive outcomes in K-12?

Carolynne Beno: We do have exemplary districts/schools in California. By using the California State Dashboard you can locate schools/districts with positive outcomes for students with disabilities:

<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/> Importantly, there are different models supportive of inclusion of students with disabilities. Two areas to think about are collaborative learning support models (such as co-teaching) and best first instruction supportive of students with disabilities (Universal Design for Learning, for example). Here are a few exemplary programs that come to mind - Rocklin Unified School District is doing interesting work in Universal Design for Learning and Sanger Unified School District has done a lot of work with co-teaching. We also observe positive outcomes for students with disabilities in Davis Joint Unified; they have accomplished inclusion in the past using para educator push-in support and are now transitioning to a co-teaching model.

Fred McFarlane and Mari Guillermo: Lodi Unified School District and Desert Mountain SELPA have programs using an inclusion model driven by the student and family needs as opposed to funding streams. Lodi's Career Connection program, in particular, has support from the Board to the staff for a preschool to employment path for students.

Q9. Has anyone looked at the impact of positive role models on post-secondary outcomes? For example pairing successful individuals with disabilities in the workforce or higher education with students or creating a curriculum that promotes disability from a positive cultural perspective. Or how might either of these programs impact in-service and/or pre-service teachers?

Fred McFarlane and Mari Guillermo: One of the successful partnerships during the implementation of CaPROMISE was between the LEAs and Independent Living Centers (ILC). The ILCs provided workshops to youth on numerous topics including self-advocacy and self-determination. The staff that provided the training were themselves individuals with disabilities. The ILC could be a source for LEAs to access mentors and role models for post-secondary success.

Lauren Lindstrom: My research team has done some work in the area of disability awareness and also advocacy skills. We have developed a curriculum called Paths 2 the Future, that is currently being field tested in multiple high schools in Oregon. For information on the results of that program, see:

Lindstrom, L., Hirano, K., Ingram, A., DeGarmo, D. & Post, C. (2019). "Learning to be myself": Paths 2 the Future curriculum for young women with disabilities. *Journal of Career Development*, 46(4), 472-486..