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Students With Disabilities Face Challenges, Opportunities In Transition From High School

Graduation Rates for Students With Disabilities Lag Behind Peers

Customized Highlights Reports Issued for All 50 States and D.C.

WASHINGTON—June 4, 2015—Today, the nation’s public schools serve nearly 6 million students with disabilities from ages 6 to 21, accounting for about 9 percent of all individuals in this age range. The large majority of these students (82 percent) are “mainstreamed” and spend a substantial share of their school hours in the same classrooms as their non-disabled peers. Four decades ago—before the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its predecessor legislation existed—the experiences and opportunities of this population were vastly different. In the early 1970s, these youths were marginalized both in school and in life, with only one-fifth of children with disabilities even enrolled in public schools.

The 2015 edition of *Education Week’s Diplomas Count* report—*Next Steps: Life After Special Education*—explores the experiences of students with disabilities, who are coming of age at a time when they, like all high school students, are increasingly expected to perform to high academic standards and to prepare for further education or training and a productive role in the workplace. This tenth installment of the annual report highlights the challenges and opportunities awaiting these students as they transition from the K-12 education system to a more independent adult life.

“Despite the significant progress witnessed during the past generation, students with disabilities continue to face significant hurdles as they follow their paths through school and beyond,” said Christopher B. Swanson, Vice President of Editorial Projects in Education, the nonprofit organization that publishes *Education Week*. “These challenges are particularly evident as these youths reach the end of the high school years and take their first steps into a wider world, often without the resources and supports they had received through special education programs.”

As *Education Week’s* reporting underscores, early and comprehensive transition planning that fully involves the youths and their families can be a crucial step in identifying ambitious but realistic goals for students with disabilities, and helping them navigate the often-unfamiliar terrain of the post-high-school world. Teaching these young adults to be effective advocates for their own needs and interests can further support successful transitions into adulthood.

The report brings the diverse experiences of students with disabilities to life through a series of five profiles of young adults with a range of disabilities. They powerfully share, in their own words, their struggles, successes, concerns, and hopes for the future.

As always, *Diplomas Count* also features the latest graduation rates for the nation and states, this year with a particular focus on the outcomes of students with disabilities. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, 81 percent of the high school class of 2013 graduated with a regular diploma, marking several years of improvement for the nation as a whole and a large majority of states. With a graduation rate of only 62 percent, students with disabilities lag considerably behind their peers.

Results vary greatly from state to state, with graduation rates for students with disabilities ranging from a low of 23 percent in Mississippi to a high of 80 percent in Arkansas. Among the factors that may influence patterns of high school completion are school discipline practices that disproportionately affect special education students, as well as significant state-level discretion in setting graduation requirements that may be less rigorous for students with disabilities than for their peers.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVES AVAILABLE AT EDWEEK.ORG

- The full *Diplomas Count 2015* report and interactive tools: <http://www.edweek.org/go/dc15>.
- Customized reports for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia featuring the latest high school graduation rates for students as a whole and specific subgroups. The reports also provide a detailed portrait of students with disabilities, including population demographics, discipline referrals, academic achievement, and high school completion patterns: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/dc/2015/state-highlights>.

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The Education Week Research Center is the research division of the Bethesda, Md.-based nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education. It conducts policy surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in the annual Quality Counts, Technology Counts, and Diplomas Count reports. The center also conducts independent research studies and maintains the Education Counts online data resource. The Research Center is on the Web at www.edweek.org/rc.