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## Student Outcomes in Special Education: A Review and Study Options

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Background:** The Washington Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to determine 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.**

This report summarizes what is already known about student outcomes for special education and suggests possible ways to learn more about special education programs.

**The University of Washington's Role:** Staff at the College of Education/Experimental Education Unit of the University of Washington have done research over the past decade on outcomes for those special education students who graduate from high school. They summarized their research on high school graduates from three school districts in Washington and national research on educational outcomes for such graduates. Their work is available as a separate report.

**Highlights** of their work in three school districts in Washington State:

- 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.
- **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.
- **Postsecondary attendance** rates are relatively high, but 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.

**Their recommendations** regarding a longitudinal system for collecting information on special education outcomes are:

- 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.

**Future Directions for Special Education Outcomes Study:** A major, comprehensive longitudinal study of special education outcomes is **not** a feasible option at present. In Washington State, we have had only limited experience with this approach in the field of K-12 education. Conducting such a study would be complicated and costly.

**Four** options for follow-up studies on special education outcomes, however, could shed light on issues that surfaced in the 1994 legislative studies of special education:

- Develop a tracking system for children served in the ***Preschool Developmentally Delayed*** program. What happens as students move from preschool into elementary school? What kinds of educational programs do they receive? What types of special education services, if any, do they receive? Is it possible to measure and track outcomes for preschool students as they progress through the K-12 system?
- Describe the educational services provided to children in the ***Behavior Disabilities*** funding category in a sample of Washington's school districts. Assess the feasibility of defining and tracking educational outcomes for such students. How are they accommodated in regular classes? What are the educational attainments for students with behavior disabilities?
- Develop a pilot project with interested school districts for a ***different approach in special education***, which would foster a more dynamic interaction of student assessment, instruction, curriculum content, student learning and measurements of student progress.
- Develop a link between defining and tracking outcomes in special education and the assessment activities of the ***Commission on Student Learning***. Students with special needs will be included in any future data tracking system that will document student educational attainment in Washington State. Any longitudinal approach for special education will have to link up with the Commission's overall directions for Washington's K-12 system.