

RESEARCH FINDINGS BRIEF

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Overview of RRTC's Purpose

The purpose of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) is to conduct a strategic program of research, training, technical assistance, and information dissemination focused upon educational supports that increase access and improve outcomes for persons with disabilities in postsecondary education programs and subsequently, in the labor force. Addressing this priority, the primary goals of the RRTC are as follows: 1) To identify the nature and range of educational supports 2) To identify new technologies that improve postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities; 3) To identify effective supports and models of support delivery that contribute to improved outcomes for students with disabilities; 4) To investigate methods by which the supports in postsecondary programs can be extended to the employment environment, including students with severe disabilities; and 5) To provide training, technical assistance and information to educational support personnel, public and private rehabilitation personnel, career placement specialist, and students with disabilities concerning the effectiveness of specific educational supports and models of delivery in improving postsecondary educational and career outcomes of the people with disabilities.

Topical Review – Secondary School Influences and Postschool Outcomes

AUDIENCE Secondary school general and special educators, vocational educators and transition personnel, administrators, and postsecondary school support providers, counselors, faculty, researchers, and teacher trainers.

ISSUE

Students with disabilities graduate from secondary school and attempt postsecondary education at significantly lower rates than students without disabilities. This review examines four areas of concern thought to have an influence upon students with disabilities completion of high school and subsequent postschool outcomes of employment and participation in postsecondary education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the efforts of persons in the field in regards to secondary school dropout prevention and intervention with students with disabilities?

What are the efforts of persons in the field to improve academic results for students with disabilities in secondary schools and subsequent participation in postsecondary education?

What secondary school transition practices have been developed and implemented with students with disabilities?

What educational supports are provided to students with disabilities in postsecondary education programs?

METHOD

This review examines information from the extant knowledge base focused upon the three questions of concern. Literature was gathered using computer searches with several electronic databases covering the past twenty years. Information deemed pertinent to the four research questions was systematically analyzed applying multi-vocal literature and participatory action research approaches.

FINDINGS

Efforts at secondary school dropout prevention and intervention

- An average of 22% of all students with disabilities drop out of secondary school compared to 12% for their peers without disabilities – these figures increase significantly for all students when considering minority status and conditions of poverty.
- Studies indicate that the primary influences (e.g., failure, poor grades, low self-esteem, poor attendance, repeating a grade, and dislike of school) upon dropout rates are the same for youth with and without disabilities.

- Data indicate that students who complete occupationally or vocationally orientated courses of study had significantly lower absenteeism and a lower probability of dropping out of school.

Efforts to improve secondary school academic results

- Secondary schools have had difficulty providing coordinated and integrated accommodations and supports to help students with disabilities fulfill high academic expectations.
- By focusing upon “functional life skills” in lieu of academic programming, secondary school special education programs limit the expectations and opportunities of students with disabilities to achieve high academic standards.
- Studies indicate that students with disabilities are negatively affected by traditional instructional practices in high schools; research suggests that methods such as problem-based learning, constructivist classrooms, meta-cognitive approaches, graphic organizers, and other thinking maps assist students with disabilities to learn academic content in secondary schools.

Efforts to implement Secondary Transition Practices

- Employment experience (paid work experience, work study, and vocational education experiences) during the high school years are significant factors when predicting participation in postsecondary education and postschool employment for students with disabilities.
- Functionally orientated curricula which is systematically connected to academic learning (integrated curriculum, contextual learning models, work-based learning) contributes to positive postschool outcomes of employment and postsecondary education for youth with disabilities.

Efforts to plan for and provide educational supports in postsecondary programs

- The provision of educational supports in postsecondary settings is a relatively recent activity and is not well studied; it is known that students with disabilities access, retain, and graduate from postsecondary educational programs at a significantly lower rate than their non-disabled peers. Those students with disabilities who graduated take a significantly longer period of time to complete their degrees than non-disabled peers.
- Self-advocacy and self-determination are considered among the most important skills for students with disabilities to possess when seeking access into postsecondary educational programs; the need to understand one’s disability and be able to advocate for needed supports and accommodations are critical skills for success.

IMPLICATIONS

- In many cases we know more about what does not work than what works; there is a need to collect data which supports the effectiveness of specific interventions linked to the positive postschool outcomes of continued postsecondary education and employment.
- Secondary transition programs and services provide a foundation for improved postschool outcomes for students with disabilities; there is a need to determine which program models and services work with which populations (types of disability, socio-economic and minority/cultural status) and which types of schools and communities.
- There is a need to further study how secondary schools do and do not prepare students with disabilities for participation in postschool employment and continued education; the need for self-advocacy skills and the ability to solicit one’s own supports are critical to success in postsecondary school environments.

For further information on this brief, please contact Robert Stodden, (808) 956-9199; stodden@hawaii.edu

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