Key Points

- The post-school outcomes of young adults with disabilities serve as an indicator both of compelling progress and pressing needs in our field.
- The outcomes students with disabilities experience during and after leaving high school highlight just how essential it is to build transition services and supports upon a strong and deep evidence base.
- Although research addressing the transition to adulthood has expanded steadily since transition services were first federally mandated in 1990, the field is quite young and there is still much to learn about how best to design and deliver effective transition education.
- Research clearly demonstrates that the future prospects of youth with disabilities can be improved dramatically when schools implement research-based strategies.
- Continued investment is needed to (a) carry out this research with a high degree of rigor, (b) produce findings that will have relevance for the wide range of students served in schools across the country, and (c) share back findings in ways that will reach educators and penetrate practice.

The Importance and Impact of Transition-Focused Research

- More than 400,000 students with disabilities exit high school each year.
- On the cusp of adulthood, most youth with disabilities have aspirations for a good job, a chance to go to college, a safe and comfortable place to live, and meaningful opportunities to participate in and contribute to their community—just as their peers without disabilities do.
- Although more students with disabilities than ever are achieving successful post-school outcomes, a “rich, enviable life” remains elusive for far too many young people with disabilities; this is especially true for students with severe disabilities.
- Transition services refers to a coordinated set of activities focused on equipping students with the skills, supports, and connections they need to move from high school to post-school activities reflecting their personal goals and individual strengths.
- Researchers across the country have worked in tandem to develop an array of promising and evidence-based transition practices shown to make a real difference in the lives of youth and youth adults with disabilities, as well as their families.
- The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) has been instrumental in these efforts, funding compelling research:
  - Exploring factors contributing to better post-school work, college, and community outcomes for students with visual impairments, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism, and other disabilities;
  - Developing rigorous transition assessment instruments, promising vocational programs, career development curricula, interventions to promote student self-determination, and innovative technologies to foster independence;
  - Evaluating models of effective interagency collaboration, peer- and adult-delivered supports, and programs for youth in foster care;
• And many other topics.

• Much more work is needed to expand the rigor, relevance, and reach of research addressing the transition-related needs of youth and young adults with disabilities.

**Transition Matters: Connecting Youth with Disabilities to Work and Community Experiences**

- My colleagues and I have received funding from NCSER to carry out two projects focused on improving transition outcomes for youth with severe disabilities.
- There are almost 1 million (938,000) students with intellectual disabilities, autism, or multiple disabilities served in elementary, middle, and high schools across the country.
- Our recently completed project focused on developing a set of effective, but feasible, strategies schools could use to connect these students with severe disabilities to early work and community experiences that might set them on a course toward a future career.
- Some of our most intriguing project findings include:
  - Only one quarter (26%) of young adults with severe disabilities nationally were working for pay up to two years after leaving high school; almost half (43%) of these jobs were in segregated settings (i.e., most or all other employees also had disabilities) and most were at fairly low wages.
  - Young adults with severe disabilities who had paid jobs while in high school were 2.3 times more likely to be working after high school; parent expectations were also a significant predictor of post-school employment.
  - Yet, we found that only 28% of students with severe disabilities nationally worked during high school and only 15% of students locally held a summer job.
  - Teacher expectations were found to be a significant predictor of whether or not students with severe disabilities work during high school and a large proportion of these educators reported substantial professional development needs related to the career preparation of youth with disabilities.
  - When schools implemented a set of five practical strategies—community-wide conversations focused on identifying creative employment solutions, local resource mapping to identify local employment opportunities and supports, summer-focused planning for youth, community connectors who make linkages between students and job openings, and employer liaisons who identified businesses willing to hire youth—nearly two thirds (66%) of youth with severe disabilities were able to successfully obtain summer jobs.
  - Employed youth held a range of jobs, including working in food service, childcare, clerical, and custodial positions.
  - Community members were quite willing to assist schools in expanding employment opportunities for youth with disabilities.
  - Local employer networks and chambers of commerce identified a wide range of ways they could partner with schools to promoting early work experiences and successful transitions, such as sponsoring job fairs, identifying employers willing to hire or mentor youth, or talking with students about what employers look for when hiring.
  - It is clear the experiences youth with disabilities have during high school can play a critical role in shaping their future career aspirations and outcomes into adulthood.
- Research plays an essential part in identifying how best to configure services and supports to ensure students with severe disabilities can access and benefit most from these important transition experiences.