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Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, U.S. Senate

July 2003

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth

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GAO-03-773

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-03-773, a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, U.S. Senate

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth

Why GAO Did This Study

States receive federal funds under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to help students with disabilities reach their postsecondary goals, and various federal programs offer services that can assist these youth. However, research has documented that youth with disabilities are less likely to transition into postsecondary education and employment. Congress requested that GAO provide information on (1) the proportion of IDEA students completing high school with a diploma or alternative credentials, and their postsecondary status; (2) the transition problems being reported and state and local actions to address them; and (3) the types of transition services provided by the vocational rehabilitation, the Workforce Investment Act youth, and the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency programs, and the factors affecting participation of IDEA youth.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Department of Education (1) gather and provide states with information on sound strategies to collect and use postsecondary data, (2) develop a plan to provide states with timely feedback and consistent quality of technical assistance, and (3) coordinate with other federal agencies to provide IDEA students and their families with information on federally funded transition services.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-773.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David Bellis at (415) 904-2272 or bellisd@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Of all IDEA youth who left high school during the 2000-01 school year, 57 percent received a standard diploma and an additional 11 percent received an alternative credential. High school completion patterns of IDEA youth have remained stable over recent years despite concerns that states' increasing use of exit examinations would result in higher dropout rates. Students with some types of disabilities were much less likely, however, to complete high school with a standard diploma, receiving an alternative credential or dropping out instead. IDEA youth without a diploma have some options for entering employment or postsecondary education, but national data on their post-school status are over a decade old. Twenty-one states routinely track students' post-school status, but these data have some limitations. While most states used post-school data for program improvement purposes such as monitoring service delivery, some officials indicated that guidance was needed on how to best collect and use these data.

A variety of transition problems, such as lack of vocational training and poor linkages between schools and service providers, have been consistently reported by students, parents, and others. While state and local educational agencies have taken actions to address some of the problems, other problems such as lack of transportation are less likely to be addressed at the state level. While state Directors of Special Education reported being generally satisfied with assistance provided to them by the Department of Education in addressing transition issues, some expressed concerns about the timeliness of the federal feedback on their state improvement plans and inconsistency in the quality of technical assistance provided by the six federal Regional Resource Centers.

The vocational rehabilitation (VR) program, the Workforce Investment Act youth program (WIA), and the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency (Ticket) program all offer an array of employment and education-related services that can aid some IDEA youth. However, several factors may impede participation by the IDEA populations that are eligible for services. The lack of participation may be explained in part by the insufficient capacity of the VR and WIA programs to serve eligible populations requesting services, and potential concerns of Ticket participants about losing public assistance because of employment income. A general lack of awareness by youth and families of these programs may also limit participation.

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Abbreviations

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	individualized education program
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NLTS	National Longitudinal Transition Study
NLTS2	National Longitudinal Transition Study-2
OSEP	Office of Special Education Programs
RSA	Rehabilitation Services Administration
SIG	State Improvement Grant
SLIDEA	Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
SPeNSE	the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSDI	Social Security Disability Insurance
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
VR	vocational rehabilitation
WIA	Workforce Investment Act youth program

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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

July 31, 2003

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate

Dear Senator Kennedy:

In 2003, states received nearly $9 billion for assuring that over 6 million children and youth identified as having a disability received a free appropriate public education, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).[1] Most youth had been identified as having learning disabilities such as dyslexia, with a smaller number having some type of emotional, mental, or physical impairment. Research has documented that youth with disabilities—especially those with some types of disabilities such as emotional disturbances—are less likely to transition into postsecondary education and employment once they leave high school. In the 1997 Amendments to IDEA, Congress required greater state and local accountability for improving graduation rates and postsecondary results for youth with disabilities. The law directed state education agencies to include youth with disabilities in statewide achievement assessments, and to begin including a statement of the transition service needs in students' individualized education program (IEP) at age 14, in addition to age 16. The Department of Education (Education) monitors states' compliance with these requirements, as well as provides technical assistance to enhance state and local capacity to improve graduation rates and the postsecondary employment and education status for youth with disabilities. In addition, other federal agencies fund programs that can assist youth with disabilities during their transition into the adult world.

In an effort to better ensure that all students have the necessary academic preparation to successfully pursue postsecondary education or employment, many states are now requiring that students pass exit examinations to graduate from high school with a diploma. However,

[1]The data on the number of children covered under IDEA are for the 2001-02 school year, the latest year for which data are available.

concerns have been raised that states' use of exit examinations will result in higher dropout rates for youth with disabilities or issuing alternative credentials[2] in lieu of diplomas that may limit youths' options for postsecondary education and employment. While federally funded transition services are available to help youth with disabilities pursue postsecondary options, there are also concerns that many may not be using these services. To address these concerns, you asked that we provide information on: (1) the proportion of IDEA students completing high school with a diploma or alternative credentials, and what is known about their postsecondary education and employment outcomes; (2) the types of transition problems that have been reported and actions taken by state and local education agencies to address them; and (3) the types of transition services provided by the vocational rehabilitation (VR) program, the Workforce Investment Act youth program (WIA), and the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency (Ticket) program, and the factors affecting the number of IDEA youth using them.

To provide this information, we administered and analyzed results from a survey to 50 state Directors of Special Education, as well as conducted phone interviews with state officials in the 21 states that reported routinely collecting data on IDEA students' postsecondary outcomes. We also visited 3 states and 6 school districts where we met with state and local officials, school administrators, teachers, parents, IDEA students, and service providers.[3] In addition, we synthesized the findings of nationally available studies on IDEA students' transition experiences, interviewed federal officials responsible for programs that can assist students during transition, and analyzed program data from federal agencies administering these programs. Appendix I explains our methodology in more detail.

We performed our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards between June 2002 and June 2003.

[2]Alternative credentials may be issued based on various criteria, including completion of an IEP, attendance, or occupational skill attainment.

[3]We conducted fieldwork in New York, Alabama, and California. We selected these states to obtain a mix based on differences in geographic location, the size of the IDEA population in the state, high school completion patterns, exit examination policies for IDEA youth, postsecondary data collection efforts, and state monitoring processes, as well as recommendations of experts in transition.

Results in Brief

State data reported by Education show that in the 2000-01 school year, about 70 percent of IDEA students completed high school with either a standard diploma or an alternative credential. However, completion rates ranged from 45 percent to 83 percent depending on disability type. The high school completion rate was the lowest for youth with emotional disturbances and the highest for youth with impairments affecting hearing or eyesight. Despite concerns that states' increasing use of exit examinations would result in more IDEA youth dropping out of high school, high school completion patterns have remained fairly stable, perhaps in part, because states have generally offered alternative routes to high school completion for youth with disabilities. However, what happens to IDEA youth after they leave high school is difficult to determine. Less than half of the states routinely collect data on students' employment or education status after graduation, and existing data collection efforts have limitations. Despite limitations of individual states' efforts, state studies taken together show that IDEA youth were much more likely to enter employment than postsecondary education or training programs. In Wisconsin, for example, 80 percent of IDEA youth reported being employed and 47 percent reported attending some type of postsecondary education institution 1 year out of high school.[4] While most state officials reported using data on IDEA youth postsecondary status for purposes such as monitoring service delivery or targeting schools for technical assistance, some officials indicated that guidance was needed on how to best collect and use these data. Education officials in 2 states, for example, were unsure whether their survey questions were appropriate to obtain the best information on outcomes, while another state official had concerns that local school systems did not have the expertise to use such data to improve transition outcomes for IDEA youth.

During our site visits, students, parents, teachers, and others consistently reported a variety of problems that impede youth transition to postsecondary education and employment, including poor linkages between schools and youth service providers and a lack of community work experience while in high school. States and local education agencies have taken various steps to address some of the problems, including hiring transition coordinators and offering work preparation experiences, such as job shadowing opportunities. Some schools, however, have not yet benefited from these efforts and continue to experience problems. For

[4]Percentages do not add to 100 since some youth were both employed and in postsecondary school.

example, a number of schools still rely on special education teachers to develop linkages with community service providers according to the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIIDEA), although teachers indicated during our site visits that they often do not have the time or training to do so. Further, while research has shown work experience and vocational education to be a significant factor in obtaining postsecondary employment with higher earnings, findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) show that 60 percent of IDEA youth had paid work experience and about 24 percent received vocational services. Our survey of state Directors of Special Education shows that states have developed action plans to increase services such as vocational training, and community work experience for IDEA youth. Other significant problems, however, are less likely to be addressed because they are not considered by state officials to be within the purview of the education system. For example, the 3 states we visited did not include transportation problems for IDEA youth in their state improvement plans, although it was one of the most cited problems by parents and school and state officials. Education provides some assistance to states in their efforts to address transition problems, and most state Directors of Special Education found this assistance useful. For example, states can use Education's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process to obtain feedback on state improvement plans for addressing transition problems, and obtain related technical assistance from Education's Regional Resource Centers for Special Education (Regional Resource Centers). State officials expressed some concerns, however, about the timeliness of Education's feedback on their state plans and some inconsistency in the quality of assistance provided by the Regional Resource Centers.

The VR, WIA, and Ticket programs all provide similar and complementary services that can ease youth transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment, but several factors may affect how many IDEA youth use them. Services include tutoring and study skills training, job coaching and placement, as well as necessary support services such as transportation and counseling. However, IDEA youth are not automatically eligible for these services. For example, available data suggest that about 29 percent of IDEA youth meet Workforce Investment Act's low-income requirement, and about 13 percent of IDEA youth meet Ticket's age and benefit requirements. While not all IDEA youth eligible for VR, WIA, or Ticket services may need or want to use them, several factors may impede those that do. For example, WIA officials from states we visited said that workforce centers often do not have the expertise to serve youth with disabilities, and may refer these youth to VR; Education

officials report that a number of states currently have waiting lists for VR services. The most recent data available from fiscal year 2001 show that VR agencies in 25 states had waiting lists for its services that may defer access for transitioning youth. Further, youth may not access services because they are concerned about losing access to public assistance, or are unaware that these federal resources exist. For example, while all youth aged 18 or older that qualify for Social Security disability benefits are eligible for transition services under the Ticket program, less than 1 percent participate, in part, due to concerns that employment income may jeopardize their eligibility for other federal and state services such as health insurance and subsidized housing according to parents and service providers we spoke with. Finally, students, parents, and teachers who are responsible for identifying transition service needs were generally unaware of the universe of available federal transition services and how to access them in the states we visited. While most people we talked with were aware of VR services, many were unaware of the Ticket program, and knowledge of the Workforce Investment Act assistance centers varied widely, even though these programs all serve overlapping populations.

We are making recommendations to Education to help state and local education agencies improve transition outcomes for IDEA youth by disseminating information on best practices for collecting and using data on their postsecondary status, providing more timely and consistent services to states seeking assistance, and identifying strategies for informing students and families about federal transition resources.

Background

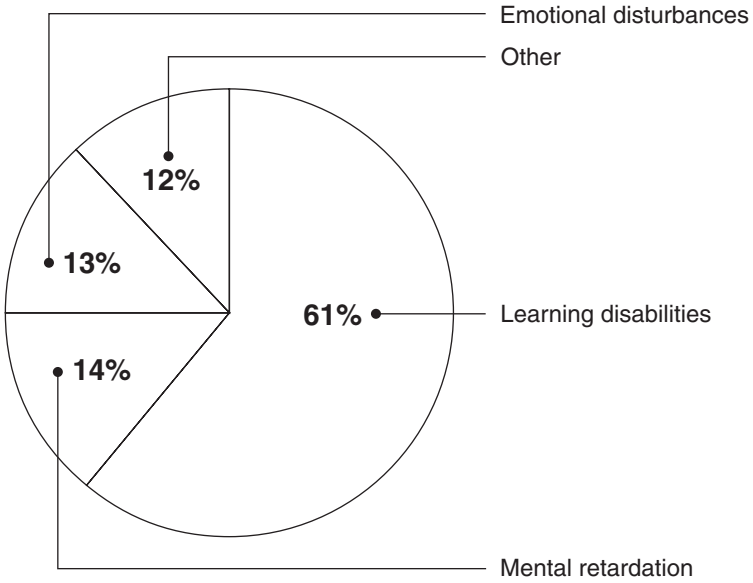
States that receive IDEA funding must comply with certain requirements for special education and related services. These requirements include the development of an IEP that spells out the specific special education, related services, and supplementary aids and services to be provided to each student based on the student's needs, including transition services designed to help the student obtain the skills and experiences to reach desired postsecondary goals.

During the 2000-01 school year, over 300,000 IDEA youth left high school.[5] Most youth had been identified as having learning disabilities such as

[5]This includes those students that graduated with a diploma or alternative credential, dropped out, died, or aged out.

dyslexia, with a smaller number having some type of emotional, mental, or physical impairment, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Disability Characteristics of IDEA Youth Leaving High School in School Year 2000-01



Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

Note: Disability types included in the "other" category are speech or language impairments, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, autism, deaf-blindness, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments. They have been combined into a single category because each of these disability groups represents less than 10 percent of IDEA youth population leaving high school.

In an effort to raise expectations for IDEA youth and to make school systems accountable for their performance, IDEA Amendments of 1997 required that these students be included in state and district assessments, to the extent possible. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also required school systems to establish annual assessments in order to demonstrate that all students, including those with disabilities, made academic progress. Although federal law does not mandate that school systems tie assessment results to graduation with a standard diploma, current law does provide states with the flexibility to implement exit examination policies that would require students to pass an exit examination in order to graduate with a diploma.

Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provides a number of resources to assist state and local education agencies in serving

children and youth with disabilities. One such resource is OSEP's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process, whereby OSEP provides feedback to state education officials on state improvement plans they develop to address problems providing education and transition services to IDEA youth at the state and local level. Another resource is Education's six Regional Resource Centers for Special Education through which OSEP facilitates networking and information sharing among states, and helps state and local areas improve education programs by providing technical assistance, consultation, and training.

In addition, the federal government funds other services that may offer assistance to IDEA youth during their transition from high school into postsecondary education or employment through programs administered by agencies such as Education, the Department of Labor (Labor), and the Social Security Administration (SSA).

The Department of Education. Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration provides funds to state VR agencies to help persons with disabilities prepare for and engage in gainful employment. The regulations implementing the Rehabilitation Act require state VR programs to develop an individualized plan for employment for students eligible for vocational rehabilitation services before they leave school. Furthermore, for a student with a disability who is receiving special education services, this plan must be coordinated with the student's IEP in terms of goals, objectives, and services.

The Department of Labor. Labor's Employment and Training Administration oversees the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The Workforce Investment Act promotes partnerships among diverse programs and community representatives, including educational institutions. For all youth, who are between 14 and 21 years of age, WIA includes provisions for preparing them for the transition from high school to employment and postsecondary education that may interrelate to the transition requirements under IDEA.

The Social Security Administration. SSA implements the Ticket program, established under the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999. The goal of the Ticket program is to enable Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries and disabled or blind Supplemental Security Income (SSI) beneficiaries, who are between

18 and 64 years of age, to obtain the services necessary to find, enter, and retain employment.[6]

A Majority of IDEA Youth Complete High School, but Data on Transitions Are Limited

During the 2000-01 school year, almost 70 percent of IDEA youth completed high school with a standard diploma or an alternative credential.[7] Completion rates for IDEA youth remained stable over recent years despite concerns that states' increasing use of high school exit examinations would result in higher dropout rates. IDEA youth who leave high school without a standard diploma have some options for entering employment or postsecondary education, but national data on their postsecondary status are over a decade old. Nearly half of the states routinely collect such data, but states' data collection systems are subject to a number of limitations. Most states used these data for purposes such as monitoring or improving programs that serve IDEA youth, but several officials involved with state data collection efforts had concerns about whether states were employing the best approaches to collecting and using these data.

A Majority of IDEA Youth Complete High School with a Diploma, but Differences Exist among Disability Types

During the 2000-01 school year, 57 percent of IDEA youth completed high school with a standard diploma and an additional 11 percent completed high school with an alternative credential. Students with some types of disabilities were much less likely to complete high school with a standard diploma, receiving alternative credentials or dropping out instead. (See table 1.) For example, in 2000-01, about 28 percent of high school graduates with mental retardation received an alternative credential instead of a diploma, compared with about 11 percent for the overall population of IDEA youth. Dropout rates for youth with emotional disturbances were generally more than twice as high as for youth with other disabilities; more than half of these students dropped out during the 2000-01 school year compared with about one-fourth or less of their peers with other disability types.

[6]SSDI is provided to workers who become disabled for as long as they cannot work due to their medical condition, and the amount of the benefit is based on past earnings. SSI is provided to individuals who can demonstrate financial need and have a disability affecting their ability to participate in any substantial gainful activity, whether or not they have worked in the past.

[7]An OSEP official said that students leaving high school without a standard diploma are still eligible to receive special education services until they receive a diploma or age out.

Table 1: High School Completion and Dropout Rates by Disability Type, 2000-01 School Year

	Completion rate			
Disability	**Diploma**	**Alternative credential**	**Total completion rate**	**Dropout rate**
All IDEA students	57	11	**68**	29
Emotional disturbances	39	6	**45**	53
Learning disabilities	64	8	**71**	27
Mental retardation	40	28	**68**	25
Other cognitive disabilities	57	20	**77**	13
Speech/language impairments	64	8	**72**	26
Orthopedic impairments	64	11	**76**	18
Sensory impairments	69	14	**83**	14
Other health impairments	68	7	**75**	23
Multiple disabilities	48	20	**68**	17

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

Notes: Total completion rate may not equal the sum of diploma and alternative credential rates because of rounding errors.

Total completion and dropout rates do not add to 100 because a small percentage of students aged out of high school or died.

We found no data source that could be used to compare high school completion rates for IDEA and general education students. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) had data from 33 states on all youth who completed high school during the 1999-2000 school year, as well as data from 36 states and the District of Columbia on all youth who dropped out during that year. These data show that among the 33 states, high school completion rates for all youth ranged from about 63 percent to

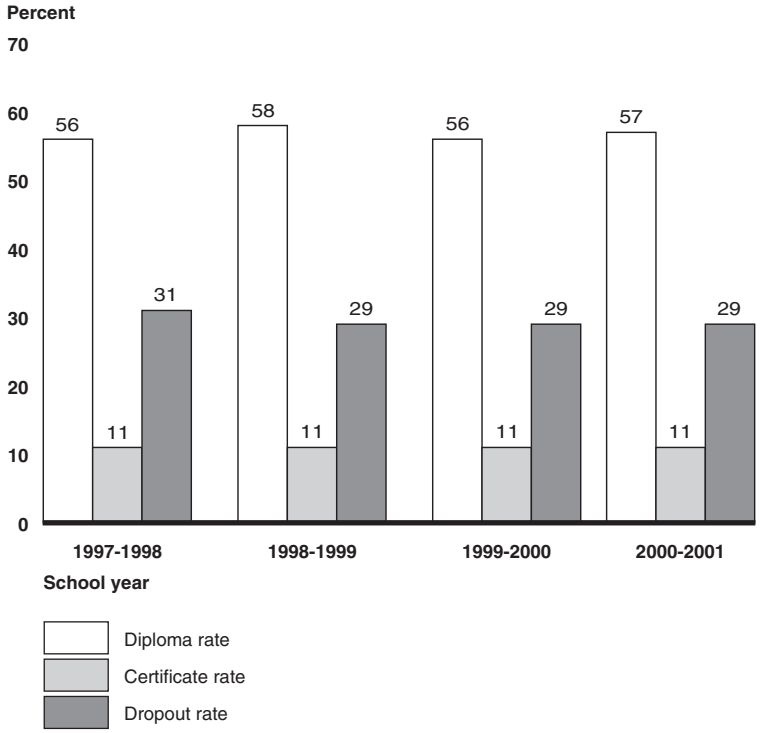
89 percent. Among 37 states, dropout rates ranged from about 3 percent to 9 percent.[8]

Graduation Rates Remained Stable Despite States' Use of High School Exit Examinations

Completion and dropout rates for IDEA youth remained stable between the 1997-98 and 2000-01 school years. As figure 2 illustrates, the rate of IDEA students graduating from high school over that time period with a standard diploma or completing high school with an alternative credential fluctuated between 67 percent and 69 percent, while the dropout rate remained at 29 percent in the latter 3 school years.

[8]Officials from OSEP and NCES cautioned that there are large differences in the methodologies used by the two entities to calculate students' completion and dropout rates. For example, OSEP's rate is based on the total number of students who left high school in a given year, while NCES' s rate is based on the total number of students enrolled in grades 9 through 12 in a given year. In addition, NCES did not provide national totals for completion or dropout rates because not all states reported the number of dropouts to NCES.

Figure 2: Completion and Dropout Rates for IDEA Students from 1997-98 to 2000-01 School Years



Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

Completion and dropout rates among IDEA youth remained stable despite states' increasing use of exit examinations for students to graduate from high school with a standard diploma. While states' use of exit examinations addressed concerns over whether students obtaining a diploma are able to demonstrate evidence of academic achievement, it also generated concerns that dropout rates will rise among youth unable to pass such examinations, particularly among youth with disabilities. A study of 1998-99 completion and dropout rates sponsored by Education did not show higher dropout rates in states with exit examinations, or among the various disability groups.[9] We updated that analysis using

[9]Berry, Hugh and William Halloran, *Graduation Exam Requirements and Students with Disabilities: A Correlational Study of Disability, Race, and Outcomes* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, February 2003).

states' completion and dropout rates from the 2000-01 school year, and found similar results.[10]

Despite these study results, the effect of exit examinations on IDEA graduation rates has not been fully tested because most states have been providing IDEA youth with different options, such as exempting them from the examinations, modifying the examinations to various extents, or offering alternative exit credentials that do not require students to pass the exit examinations.[11] For example, IDEA students in Georgia can petition for an exemption from the state's exit examination and still receive a diploma. New York allows students with disabilities who are unable to pass state's exit examinations to take a modified and less rigorous version. Other modifications available to IDEA youth in some states include using different scoring criteria or allowing IDEA students to retake the examination. In addition, more than half of the states with exit examinations also offered alternative credentials. For example, Alabama allows IDEA students to obtain an occupational diploma based on completion of courses incorporating certain career and technical education standards, such as Consumer Mathematics and Employment English in lieu of traditional Mathematics and English. A state official from Alabama stated that offering such alternative credentials assists the state in raising academic standards for all students without increasing IDEA youth's dropout rate.

IDEA Youth Transitioning from High School without Standard Diplomas Have Some Options for Entering Employment or Postsecondary Education

IDEA youth completing high school with alternative credentials or dropping out do have some opportunities to immediately enter employment. State and local officials, as well as employer representatives in states we visited, indicated that some employers place higher value on the prospective applicant's job skills, such as willingness to learn and ability to interact with others, than on a specific graduation document. For example, New York officials from the State Workforce Investment Board

[10]We updated Education's analysis for all IDEA students, but not for individual disability groups.

[11]Education's analysis of 1998-99 completion rates showed that the percentage of IDEA youth receiving a certificate in states with exit examination requirements was approximately 16 percent, compared with about 6 percent for states without such requirements. We updated that analysis for the 2000-01 school year and found that about 14 percent of IDEA youth in states that have implemented the exit examination requirement received a certificate compared with about 9 percent of IDEA youth in states that did not have such requirement or have not fully implemented it.

and a local Employment and Training Center said that employers would be willing to hire youth with disabilities without a standard diploma and provide job related training as long as they had the necessary communication skills and basic work ethic.

Options for pursuing postsecondary education include programs focusing on vocational education and skills training, as well as academic programs. In California, for example, IDEA youth can enter Regional Occupational Programs that lead to vocational certificates in a wide range of fields. While high school diplomas may not be necessary for such programs, other prerequisites, such as entrance examinations, may be required. Community colleges are another option for youth wishing to pursue a college degree. In many states, community colleges have an open enrollment policy, admitting students regardless of high school diploma status. Some community colleges, however, may require youth to pass an entrance examination to determine if they have the ability to benefit from the college's academic programs. Youth who do not pass the entrance examination may enroll in remedial adult education courses to prepare for the examination or obtain a high school equivalency degree.

State Data Showing Transition of IDEA Youth into Employment and Postsecondary Education Have Limitations

Data from Education's National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS), showing the proportion of IDEA youth who obtain jobs or pursue postsecondary education after high school, are over a decade old.[12] Education is currently funding NLTS2, but information on the long-term transition outcomes of students included in the study is not yet available since they are only now beginning to complete high school.[13] These national studies are not representative at the state level. However, according to our national survey of state Directors of Special Education, nearly half of the states routinely collect data on students' transition for their own use.[14] (See fig. 3.)

[12]Education funded NLTS in the late 1980s and early 1990s, providing information on a nationally representative sample of students ages 13 to 21 enrolled in special education programs in the 1985-86 school year.

[13]Education plans to conduct the study until 2010 and release reports annually. The study involves a nationally representative sample of special education students who were 13 to 16 years old as of December 2000.

[14]In addition, state education officials from Kansas, Maine, and Minnesota reported to us that they are in the process of developing and implementing a routine data collection system.

Figure 3: States That Collect Data on IDEA Youth Leaving High School

States without routine data collection efforts

States with routine data collection efforts

Source: GAO survey data.

Costs and funding sources for the data collection efforts varied among states. (See app. II, table 8.) To fund their data collection efforts, most states used federal funds such as those provided under IDEA, and some

states also used state funding.[15] For example, New York is using IDEA discretionary funds for a $2.75 million 7-year follow-up study, while Florida is spending approximately $400,000 for the state fiscal year 2002-03 effort, using primarily general state revenues.

Despite state efforts to collect information on the postsecondary employment and education status of IDEA youth, state methodologies have limitations that preclude using the data to represent the status of IDEA youth in the state, or decrease the usefulness of the data in other ways. (See app. II, table 9 and fig. 4 for information on state methodologies and type of data states have available.)

- **Selection of students**. Ten states did not design their follow-up efforts to include a representative sample of IDEA youth. For example, Alabama and California collected data only on students in those school districts participating in the states' model transition initiatives. In addition, approximately half of the states collecting data did not include IDEA youth who had dropped out of high school.

- **Adjusting for nonresponse bias**. At least 8 states had a response rate of less than 50 percent. For example, Texas had a response rate of less than 12 percent. Moreover, none of the states reported that they conducted analyses comparing the characteristics of respondents and nonrespondents to identify possible sources of bias in the results.

- **Ability to disaggregate data**. Six states did not collect information on IDEA students' disability type. In addition, 2 states collected information on the outcomes of all students without the ability to differentiate between outcomes for IDEA youth and their peers.

- **Timing and number of student follow-ups**. All but 1 state followed up within 2 years of students leaving high school to obtain information on their immediate transition outcomes. For example, Delaware conducted its follow-up after 6 months, while Alabama collected information 1 year

[15]IDEA funds included state discretionary grants and State Improvement Grants (SIG). Discretionary funds are awarded to states on the basis of a competitive review process. SIGs are provided by Education to assist state education agencies and their partners in reforming and improving systems for providing educational, early intervention, and transitional services, including systems for professional development, technical assistance, and dissemination of knowledge about best practices to improve results for children with disabilities.

after graduation. However, only 8 states collected data at more than one point in time to examine students' long-term transition outcomes.

- **Type of data available**. Only 6 states had data on how many students were both employed and attending postsecondary school. These data are necessary to determine the overall proportion of IDEA youth transitioning to these activities after high school. Only 11 states collected information on reasons why some students failed to successfully transition into employment or postsecondary education.

While studies from most of the states with routine data collection efforts, by themselves, are of insufficient methodological quality to be cited alone, together they show that the majority of IDEA youth were working or going to school within a year of leaving high school, and that they were more likely to be employed than to be enrolled in postsecondary education programs. For example, in Wisconsin, a state with one of the more sound approaches to data collection and analysis, 88 percent of IDEA youth who left high school between December 1999 and 2000 participated in an employment or educational activity 1 year later. Of these youth, 80 percent reported being employed and 47 percent reported attending some type of postsecondary education institution.[16] These results are consistent with the national survey findings from the early 1990s.

Most states that collected data have been using them for purposes such as monitoring school districts or targeting schools for technical assistance. (See app. II, table 10 for examples of state uses of data.) For example, Idaho looked at the transition outcomes of students in order to select school districts for focused monitoring, and New York prioritized its technical assistance to school districts that appeared to be struggling with transition. Nearly one-third of these states, however, did not regularly share the results with local school systems.

Finally, while more than half of the states do not routinely collect data on postsecondary employment and education status of IDEA youth, most expressed interest in doing so. However, officials familiar with state data collection efforts indicated that state and local school systems did not always have appropriate guidance on how data could be collected, analyzed, and used to improve programs and outcomes for youth with

[16]Percentages do not add to 100 since some youth may have been both employed and in school; the results are unweighted.

disabilities. For example, officials in 2 states reported that they were not certain whether their surveys included appropriate questions related to students' postsecondary status. In another state, an official reported that local school systems did not have the necessary expertise to use data available to them for purposes such as improving programs for IDEA youth.

Problems Impeding Transition of IDEA Youth into Postsecondary Education and Employment Remain Partially Addressed

A variety of problems that impede IDEA youth transition to postsecondary education and employment have been consistently reported by youth, parents, teachers, and others. States and local education agencies are addressing some of the reported problems related to education and work experiences youth receive while in school; however, transportation problems are less likely to be addressed at the state and local level. State Directors of Special Education are generally satisfied with assistance provided to them by Education in addressing transition issues at the state and local level, but some expressed concerns about the timeliness of federal feedback on their state improvement plans and inconsistency in the quality of technical assistance provided by federal Regional Resource Centers.

Poor Linkages between Schools and Youth Service Providers and Other Problems Impeding IDEA Youth Transition Have Been Partially Addressed at the State and Local Level

Discussions with students, parents, teachers, and others during our site visits revealed that a variety of transition problems still remain that have been consistently reported by these groups in past surveys and published studies. Transition problems affecting IDEA youth include those related to self-advocacy training and insufficient information about the transition process. For example, youth responding to a national survey by a youth association,[17] reported problems identifying and learning how to ask for specific accommodations they need to succeed in school and the workplace. In addition, parents we interviewed said they did not have information about the spectrum of education and employment service providers that were available. Other problems included an absence of linkages to adult service providers, insufficient vocational education and work-related experiences obtained during high school, and lack of

[17]The survey was conducted by the National Youth Leadership Network during 2001-02 and included responses from 202 youth with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 24. Survey respondents came from 34 states and the District of Columbia but were not randomly selected and survey results cannot be generalized to the national population of youth with disabilities.

transportation after high school to the job site or postsecondary school. (See table 2.)

Table 2: Problems Reported by Stakeholders in the Transition Process

Transition problem	Stakeholders
Lack of self-advocacy training	Youth
Insufficient information about transition process	Parents
Absence of linkages between school systems and service providers	Teachers
Lack of vocational education and community work experience	Researchers
Lack of transportation	Federal, state, and local officials

Source: National Youth Leadership Network 2001-02 Youth Survey, site visits, Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), NLTS2, and our interviews.

Self-advocacy training. Youth with disabilities responding to a national survey by a youth association, reported problems obtaining knowledge about their rights under laws like IDEA and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990,[18] and identifying and learning how to ask for specific accommodations they need to succeed in school and the workplace. Research shows that many youth with disabilities have difficulties developing the necessary attitudes and skills to prepare for their lives after graduation, but suggest that youth who obtain self-determination skills are more likely to achieve positive education and employment outcomes. State Directors of Special Education in 24 states reported that less than half of IDEA students received self-advocacy training while in high school.

Many states and local education agencies have taken various actions to provide and promote self-advocacy training. For example, 3 states passed legislation or developed regulations mandating self-advocacy curriculum in schools according to our survey of state Directors of Special Education, and 44 percent of local education agencies include self-advocacy training for IDEA youth in their curriculum according to a national survey by Education.[19] While a national survey of personnel serving students with

[18]The ADA prohibits discrimination in employment, public services, and public accommodations against qualified individuals with disabilities.

[19]SLIIDEA collected transition data in 1999-2000 from the 50 states and a nationally representative sample of districts and schools that serve children with disabilities.

disabilities[20] shows that less than two thirds of special education teachers frequently teach self-determination skills, Directors of Special Education in about half of the 50 states we surveyed reported introducing programs to train teachers on how to teach self-advocacy skills.

Transition process. Parents interviewed during our site visits reported problems helping their child navigate the transition process as students prepare to leave high school for the adult world. Research shows that when parents participate in their child's education, their child improves academically and has higher aspirations for school and career development. However, parents from our site visits and family support groups said that they did not have the necessary information to adequately participate in their child's transition from high school. Parents we interviewed said they did not have information about where to go for assistance after high school, the spectrum of education and employment service providers that were available, and the type and level of support that may be offered by providers. Moreover, they were unaware of the ADA or other laws protecting their children's rights, and family support resources available to them in the community such as Parent Training and Information Centers.[21]

States have taken some actions to provide this knowledge to parents. Eight states indicated in our survey that they have passed legislation or regulations to include parents or advocacy groups in transition planning while youth are in high school.[22] In addition, at least three-fourths of the states are funding parent centers or other family advocacy groups, establishing task forces and workgroups, and providing technical assistance to local school systems. Ongoing efforts also exist in over half

[20]SPeNSE surveyed personnel from a nationally representative sample of districts, intermediate education agencies, and state schools for students with vision and hearing impairments.

[21]Parent centers are funded by Education and serve families of children and young adults with disabilities. The centers provide training and information to parents and connect children with disabilities to community resources that address their needs. Each state has at least one parent center, and states with large populations may have more. There are approximately 100 parent centers in the United States.

[22]IDEA also requires that parents be given the opportunity to attend meetings discussing the child's individualized education program, provide consent to any provision of services to the child when given the first time, and be informed of the child's progress toward annual goals.

of the states to increase parent participation through developing culturally diverse transition materials.

Linkages between schools and service providers. Teachers responding to a national survey by Education[23] reported that in the area of IDEA youth transition, more than half rarely, if ever, coordinate referrals to adult service providers. National data from NLTS show that more than 85 percent of IDEA youth received services that were sought after high school, and IDEA legislation requires that a student's IEP include a statement of interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages, if appropriate, to ensure that IDEA youth will receive the services needed to achieve their postsecondary education or career goals. Twenty-one state Directors of Special Education reported in our survey that many local school systems do not have designated intermediaries to establish such linkages, and 18 Directors of Special Education said that their agency also had difficulty coordinating with other state agencies outside of the school system. Teachers from our site visits cited lack of time and knowledge about available service providers as part of the problem.

All states are taking some action to provide direction and resources for improving linkages between schools and service providers. Ten states reported in our survey that they passed legislation or regulations providing for greater coordination between schools and service providers. In addition, according to Education's survey of state and local education areas, while less than half of school districts reported having a transition coordinator at each high school, all but 3 states reported hiring state transition coordinators who can assist teachers in their efforts to link students with providers after high school. All states reported providing technical assistance or training to local education agencies on interagency coordination, with Connecticut also developing policies and procedures for students to access adult services, and Utah providing training to other state agencies on IDEA transition requirements.

Vocational education and community work experience. Findings based on parent interviews from NLTS2 show that 24 percent of youth received vocational services and 60 percent had paid work experiences while in high school, despite findings from the SLIIDEA study that about 90 percent of high schools reported offering prevocational training and work experience to IDEA students. Past research has shown that IDEA

[23]SPeNSE.

youth who received these services experienced higher rates of successful transition. For example, NLTS researchers reported that youth with disabilities obtaining vocational education and community work experience had been less likely to drop out of school, and achieved greater success in obtaining employment with higher earnings.[24] Those conducting more recent state and local studies reported similar results. State and local education officials from 3 states we visited indicated that school districts have difficulties offering an appropriate mix of vocational programs that reflect the job market demands as well as meet the students' career interests.

States and local education agencies have taken various actions to provide and promote vocational education and career preparation opportunities for IDEA youth. Nine Directors of Special Education in our state survey said that their state had passed legislation or regulations requiring vocational education and career preparation for IDEA students, and most Directors of Special Education said that they disseminated best practices in the area of vocational education and career preparation. Other actions taken by half of the states included funding outreach and collaboration efforts of local education agencies to create vocational education and work opportunities.

Transportation. Federal, state, and local officials in 3 states we visited all said that many youth may not have access to transportation they need to pursue employment and postsecondary education. In rural areas, public transportation may be very limited, or may not be available during the time needed to get to their job site or college. Availability of transportation is not always the only issue. One parent told us that using public transportation was not feasible because her child suffered from seizures. While private providers may be better prepared to serve youth with disabilities, parents and advocacy groups said that private providers were often unreliable and their services were not coordinated with public transportation systems. An advocacy official indicated that one reason why these providers are unreliable is because they generally operate on a priority system that gives medical needs a higher priority than employment needs.

[24]NLTS showed that vocational education has a positive impact on both education and employment outcomes for the majority of students, while work experience has a positive impact on education for all students with disabilities and on employment for students with orthopedic or health impairments.

The 3 states we visited had not addressed transition issues related to the lack of reliable transportation in their state improvement plans.[25] State education officials said these types of problems are outside their area of responsibility. In New York and California, however, some local areas are taking initiative to address this problem. In western New York, a collaborative endeavor involving 30 agencies provides transportation, as well as other services, to youth with disabilities to help them in career preparation activities. In California, youth workforce development centers work with the Sacramento Regional Transit District to provide complementary transit tickets to youth with disabilities so they can come to the centers for educational and employment services.

Education Provides Some Assistance to States in Addressing Transition Problems, but Concerns Remain about Timeliness and Consistency of Assistance

Over half of state Directors of Special Education reported that federal assistance was very helpful in assisting states address transition problems, but some stated that the timeliness or consistency of assistance could be improved. One of the ways Education provides assistance to states is by providing feedback on state improvement plans that states develop and use to show how they plan to address areas of weakness in implementing IDEA, including transition requirements.[26] While 39 state Directors of Special Education found this feedback useful, some expressed dissatisfaction over Education's timeliness in providing the feedback. For example, of 21 state plans submitted to Education in 2002, only one-fourth received feedback within 6 months, and at least another one-fifth did not receive formal written feedback for a year or more. (See table 3.)

[25]We previously reported on federal, state and local actions needed to coordinate transportation services, U.S. General Accounting Office, *Transportation - Disadvantaged Populations: Some Coordination Efforts Among Programs Providing Transportation Services, but Obstacles Persist*, GAO-03-697 (Washington D.C.: June 30, 2003).

[26]For more information on Education's oversight process, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Special Education: Clearer Guidance Would Enhance Implementation of Federal Disciplinary Provisions*, GAO-03-550 (Washington D.C.: May 20, 2003).

Table 3: Education's Response Time as of March 26, 2003, to States Submitting Improvement Plans in 2002

State	State submission date	Federal response date	Elapsed time in months
Response received			
Minnesota	February-02	March-03	14
Illinois	January-02	February-03	14
Connecticut	February-02	December-02	10
Delaware	February-02	October-02	8
Idaho	April-02	December-02	8
Nevada	July-02	January-03	7
Oklahoma	July-02	January-03	6
Wyoming	May-02	October-02	4
Virginia	October-02	February-03	4
Michigan	July-02	October-02	3
New Hampshire	August-02	October-02	2
Response pending			
South Carolina	February-02	Pending	14+
Texas	March-02	Pending	13+
Oregon	June-02	Pending	9+
North Carolina	June-02	Pending	9+
Tennessee	July-02	Pending	9+
Rhode Island	July-02	Pending	9+
Kentucky	July-02	Pending	9+
Indiana	July-02	Pending	9+
Georgia	September-02	Pending	7+
Iowa	October-02	Pending	6+

Source: Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

Education does not have a standard response period and has not set a performance goal for providing feedback to states on their improvement plans. While Education officials stated that they provide extensive informal feedback to states prior to issuing a formal written response, they also stated that they are taking action to try and expedite the agency's formal written responses. To preclude delays on the formal written feedback resulting from the agency's internal review process, Education has developed standard language and written review procedures to be used in preparing feedback. According to Education officials, having standard language and review procedures will decrease the time necessary

to write and review the feedback report. They also hope these actions will reduce the response time to states.

Another way Education provides assistance to states is by funding 6 Regional Resource Centers that states can use to obtain technical assistance for addressing transition issues.[27] Services provided to states by the centers include guidance, training, information dissemination, assistance with state development of training materials, and facilitation of meetings states convene to address problems. Directors of Special Education in 29 states reported in our survey that assistance obtained from the centers was very helpful, but there are some concerns that the quality of services was sometimes inconsistent among the centers. One center, for example, consistently received high marks from the states in that region, while the remaining 5 centers received mixed reviews.

State and center officials attributed the inconsistent quality of services to variation in the expertise available at each center, an observation also reported in a previous performance evaluation of the centers.[28] This evaluation recommended that Education provide training to alleviate the disparity in staff expertise, particularly with regard to transition issues. In response to this issue, Education officials said that the agency offers periodic professional development opportunities and encourages the centers to operate as a network by sharing knowledge and expertise. Despite these efforts, however, some states still have concerns about service quality and are turning to private consultants to obtain help with transition issues.

[27]Education also funds the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition to coordinate national resources, offer technical assistance, and disseminate information related to secondary education and transition for youth with disabilities in order to create opportunities for youth to achieve successful futures.

[28]The performance evaluation of the Regional Resource Centers was conducted by Education's Federal Resource Center of Special Education—June 2001.

The VR, WIA, and Ticket Programs Provide Transition Services, but Several Factors May Limit the Number of IDEA Youth Who Use Them

The VR, WIA, and Ticket programs all offer services that can aid some IDEA youth in their transition to postsecondary education or employment. While the federal agencies administering these programs are not required to track how many IDEA youth use them, several factors may impede participation by the IDEA populations that are eligible for services. One factor limiting services under VR and WIA is insufficient program capacity to serve all eligible populations requesting services. Another factor affecting participation under the Ticket program is family concerns about whether finding employment would result in youth losing public assistance. A factor that may affect IDEA youth participation in all programs to various extents is a general lack of awareness by youth and families that these federal resources are available for transition assistance.

The VR, WIA, and Ticket Programs Provide a Variety of Education and Employment Transition Services

The VR, WIA, and Ticket programs all offer an array of similar and complementary education, employment, and support services for certain population groups.

Education services. These services can support youth who are trying to complete their high school education as well as those youth furthering their education in postsecondary institutions, such as community colleges. Services for youth at all education levels can include those that prepare them for learning by providing tutoring and study skills training as well as providing access to educational programs through tuition support. Education services support both out of school youth, as well as those at risk of dropping out. We observed a tutoring program in an Alabama school district, for example, that used WIA funds to assist high school youth who are struggling academically.

Employment services. These services can assist IDEA youth that are trying to obtain a job or obtain job skills necessary to increase potential wages. Services for youth in either situation can include those that prepare them for employment by providing job coaching and training, as well as direct placement with an employer. A service provider under the Ticket program in New York, for example, said that in addition to employment preparation services, they help find jobs for enrollees.

Support services. These services can assist IDEA youth pursue their education and employment goals as well as achieve goals for independent living. These services can include mentoring and counseling, childcare, and transportation, as well as any other services that might be needed. In California, for example, the VR agency has cooperative agreements with education agencies to provide support services to youth with disabilities,

including financial assistance for assistive technology, such as wheelchairs and adapted computers, conducting vocational assessments for students, and providing information on options for both independent and supported living facilities.

IDEA youth are not automatically eligible for these education, employment, and support services, and the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs serve populations that are both different and overlapping. Of the approximately 2 million IDEA youth ages 14 to 21, only some of these youth are eligible for these federally funded services.

- Under the VR program, all people with a physical or mental impairment are potentially eligible for services, but states may only serve those with the most significant disabilities in times of funding constraint. The former administrator of Oregon's VR program said that in the past the state was unable to serve some youth with psychiatric disorders due to funding constraints.

- WIA primarily limits services to low-income youth that have some type of barrier to employment.[29] While disabilities under IDEA may qualify as barriers for WIA purposes, available data suggest that only about 29 percent of IDEA youth meet WIA's low-income requirement.[30]

- To qualify for the Ticket program, individuals must be at least 18 years old, and qualify for disability benefits from SSA.[31] Available data suggest that about 13 percent of the IDEA youth population meets Ticket's age and benefit requirements.[32]

Education, Labor, and SSA are not required to track the number of IDEA youth who are enrolled and obtaining transition services provided through

[29]Under WIA, youth are eligible for services if they fall within one or more of the following categories: deficit in basic skills, school dropout, homeless, runaway, or foster child, pregnant or parent, has disability, offender, or requires additional assistance to obtain employment. Income qualification can be waived for up to 5 percent of youth in a local area.

[30]To estimate the percentage of IDEA youth eligible for WIA programs, we used data reported in the NLTS2 survey on income of IDEA youth's families.

[31]Benefits are provided under the SSI program and the SSDI program.

[32]We determined the percentage of IDEA youth eligible for the Ticket program by using data provided by SSA on the number of youth ages 18 to 21 receiving Social Security and SSI disability benefits.

the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs.[33] However, available data for all youth show that over 550,000 were enrolled and received services during the time frames outlined in table 4.

Table 4: All Youth Ages 14 to 21 Served by Selected Federal Programs

Program	Time frame	Youth served
VR	10/1/01-9/30/02	175,000[a]
WIA	7/1/01-6/31/02	376,014
Ticket	2/02-11/02[b]	496
Total		**551,510**

Source: The Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration, the Council for State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration, and the Social Security Administration.

[a]The estimate of the number of youth served is based on the proportion of youth (ages 14-21) who exited the VR program in fiscal year 2001.

[b]This time period reflects the first 9 months that Ticket was implemented in 13 states.

While federal agencies are not required to collect data on the type of education, employment, and support services actually provided to IDEA youth under the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs, Education and Labor do collect information on services provided to all youth ages 14 to 21.[34] Education data on the approximately 94,000 youth who received services and exited the VR program in fiscal year 2001 show that three-fourths of youth obtained vocational, medical, and social counseling, and more youth obtained employment services than services to further their education or training. (See table 5.)

[33]In fiscal year 2002, Education began collecting data on IDEA youth.

[34]SSA does not collect data on services provided to participants in the Ticket program.

Table 5: Selected Services Provided to Youth through the VR Program in Fiscal Year 2001

Type of service	Percent of youth ages 14 to 21 served
Employment services	
Job finding services	36
Job placement services	29
Training services	
Business/vocational training	12
On-the-job training	8
Educational services	
Postsecondary educational training	21
Educational training below postsecondary level	19
Support services	
Counseling and guidance[a]	74
Transportation services	23

Source: GAO analysis of data provided by the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration.

[a]Counseling and guidance includes personal adjustment counseling, counseling that addresses medical, family, or social issues, vocational counseling, and any other form of counseling necessary for an individual to achieve an employment outcome.

Labor data on the approximately 80,000 youth who received services and exited the WIA program in fiscal year 2001 show that about 40 percent of youth obtained employment and education services, but less than one-fourth received support services. (See table 6.)[35]

Table 6: Selected Services Provided through WIA in Program Year 2001

Type of service	Percent of youth ages14 to 21 served
Employment services	41
Summer employment opportunities	50
Educational services	38
Support services	18
Leadership development opportunities	15

Source: GAO analysis of data provided by the Department of Labor.

[35]These data may be incomplete as the data set had a number of missing records.

Lack of Awareness and Other Factors May Impede IDEA Youth Participation in Federally Funded Transition Services

While IDEA youth vary in their need and desire to use federal transition services, there are several factors that may impede their access to them. Three factors that may limit IDEA youth participation include (1) limitations in program capacity to serve the eligible population seeking services, (2) youth and family fears that employment income may jeopardize access to other public assistance, and (3) a lack of awareness about the availability of the transition resources.

Program capacity. In regard to program capacity, the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs face different issues in serving IDEA youth eligible for their services. These problems include a lack of expertise to serve youth with disabilities, a lack of resources to serve all those seeking services, and unavailability of services in some states. For example:

- Under the VR program, IDEA youth compete with all adults and youth with disabilities for services. Education officials report that a number of states have waiting lists for VR services. At the end of fiscal year 2001, for example, VR agencies had more people seeking services than resources to serve them, and about 30,000 people in 25 states were on waiting lists for services. (See app. III.)[36] Of this total, Education reported that about 20 percent, or about 6,000 individuals, were on a waiting list for VR services in Washington state.

- Under WIA, IDEA youth compete with all youth facing some type of barrier to employment, and older youth also compete with adults for services under the WIA adult program.[37] WIA officials told us that WIA providers generally do not have the expertise to serve youth with disabilities,[38] and in some cases facilities do not have the appropriate physical accommodations. In light of these deficiencies, WIA officials told us that this population is often referred to VR agencies for assessment and services.

- The Ticket program has resources to serve all eligible youth seeking services; however, this new program has not yet been implemented in all

[36]Moreover, Education officials informed us that the presence of waiting lists might keep additional individuals from seeking VR services.

[37]WIA does allow local areas to waive income qualification criteria for up to 5 percent of youth served.

[38]SSA has partnered with Labor to place disability navigators at all WIA assistance facilities. The navigators will have expertise in Social Security disability programs, disability law, and other relevant issues.

states. SSA plans to complete its rollout of the program to the final 17 states and the U.S. territories by 2004, which will increase access to the program for over half of the approximately 257,000 youth receiving assistance from SSA.[39] (See app. IV.)

Fear of losing public assistance. A second contributing factor may be that some youth and families that receive public assistance are afraid that employment income will jeopardize their access to other federal and state public assistance benefits such as health insurance and subsidized housing. SSA reports that less than 1 percent of eligible youth had signed up for the Ticket program to increase self-sufficiency. In the 3 states we visited, SSA officials, school administrators, teachers, advocacy groups, and others involved in the transition process said that fear of losing federal and state benefits is a common reason why individuals are hesitant to participate in federal work incentive programs such as the Ticket program. While some of these fears may be unfounded, others are not, and working and receiving income can affect youth's ability to retain services such as health insurance benefits through Medicaid.[40] For example, while SSA has encouraged states to offer beneficiaries the opportunity to retain Medicaid benefits while earning wages, only about half of the states have established such policies. (See app. V.) While some programs allow youth to earn a certain amount of income and retain benefits, amounts allowed under the various assistance programs can differ, and many families are not aware of the contingencies. Although youth unable to sustain employment can re-enroll in public assistance programs, parents we spoke with stated that enrollment in the various programs is a lengthy and difficult process that they do not want to repeat.

Lack of awareness of available federal services. Finally, a third factor that may limit IDEA youth participation in federal programs is that many youth and families are unaware that they exist. While IDEA legislation requires schools to provide youth with transition services and information about available transition resources, students, parents, and teachers we spoke with in the 3 states visited were generally uninformed about the continuum of available federal transition services and how to access them. Most of those we talked with were familiar with the VR program and the

[39]As of December 2002, about 244,000 youth between ages 18 to 21 were SSI recipients and about 13,000 youth 21 and under were SSDI recipients.

[40]Medicaid is a jointly funded, federal-state entitlement program that finances health care coverage for low-income individuals.

types of services it provides.[41] However, many were unfamiliar with the Ticket program, and familiarity with the services provided through the Workforce Investment Act assistance centers varied dramatically within and among states. In one California suburban community, a high school we visited had a close working relationship with the local assistance center, and school administrators, teachers, and students were aware of the services available there. However, teachers, parents, and students we talked to at an urban New York school were unfamiliar with the assistance centers that provide WIA services, even though a center was located only a few miles away.

Education, Labor, and SSA recognize that action is needed to reach out to youth and families and tell them about federal resources such as the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs. While these agencies have several efforts underway to publicize or increase awareness of available resources, these efforts may not include information on all federal transition resources, or reach youth, families, and teachers involved in developing transition plans for youth leaving high school. For example:

- Education's Regional Resource Center in the Southeast developed a guide to inform students and families about available resources, but this guide does not include information about WIA services. The guide is available on the Web, but there is no consistent distribution process to provide the guide to all youth and families in all states served by the center.

- Labor partnered with SSA and other federal agencies to identify more than 200 federal programs among 12 federal agencies that serve persons with disabilities. A Labor official said that once the report is finalized, it will be available to the public, including IDEA youth and families; however, this report is primarily targeted to policymakers and program officials.

- SSA has several efforts underway to increase awareness of the Ticket program among other federal and state agencies, service providers, and advocacy groups. While the agency is conducting local outreach using benefits planning, assistance, and outreach centers as well as protection

[41]VR agencies are required by law to conduct outreach to special education students while they are in high school.

and advocacy partners, these efforts do not consistently target youth and families through high schools.[42]

Conclusions

Youth served under IDEA are not a homogeneous population, and graduation patterns and postsecondary education and employment status can differ significantly among those with physical, sensory, emotional, or cognitive disabilities. IDEA requires individualized education programs that address needed transition services that recognize the unique challenges each youth with a disability must face. These programs can best be developed when states and schools have the necessary information to evaluate how well existing programs are working to assist youth during and after graduation. State education officials increasingly show interest in collecting data on what happens to IDEA youth after they leave high school, and nearly half of the states voluntarily collect such data. Many states, however, are still searching for ways to develop cost-effective and sound data collection systems and there is no central information point to share alternative methodologies that may be most useful for identifying which groups of IDEA youth are behind their peers and whether programmatic changes are needed to eliminate performance gaps. In the absence of guidance and information on how to collect and use postsecondary data, state and local education agencies and schools will continue to experience difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs for students with disabilities, initiating program improvements, and targeting resources to areas or groups that need them most.

Although state and local education agencies are taking steps to minimize transition problems for youth with disabilities, challenges such as developing linkages between schools and community youth service providers still remain that need to be addressed both inside and outside of the education system. While Education provides some federal resources to help state and local education agencies address these problems, the usefulness of the assistance may be compromised because of delays and inconsistent quality of some services. Some transition challenges are likely to remain unless federal assistance is strengthened and used to help states take a more holistic approach to dealing with transition issues.

[42]Under the Benefits Planning, Assistance, and Outreach Program, SSA has established cooperative agreements with entities across the nation to provide benefits counseling and assistance, and conduct ongoing outreach efforts to inform beneficiaries of available work incentives. SSA also established the Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security Program to serve SSI and SSDI beneficiaries who want to work.

Federal assistance provided under the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs can help augment transition services provided by state and local education agencies, or fund transportation or other services that are otherwise unavailable. While these services are intended to help youth overcome barriers to a successful transition, this assistance cannot be provided if youth, parents, and education officials are unaware that these services exist. In the absence of improved coordination among federal agencies to provide these customers with information on the array of available federal resources, youth eligible for such services will not be able to use them in their efforts to achieve a successful education or employment outcome.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To expand the availability and use of data on the postsecondary employment and education status of IDEA youth, we are recommending that Education collect and disseminate information to states on sound strategies for collecting these data and appropriately using these data for program improvement.

To enhance federal assistance provided to states to help them address existing transition problems, we are recommending that Education develop an action plan with specific time frames to

- provide states with feedback on state improvement plans to address education and transition problems of IDEA youth and
- ensure consistency in the quality of technical assistance provided to states by its regional resource centers.

Finally, to increase awareness of available federal transition services, we are recommending that Education take the lead in working with other federal agencies to develop strategies for using the federally mandated high school transition planning process to provide IDEA youth and their families with information about the full complement of federally funded transition services.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to Education, Labor, and SSA officials for their review and comment. Agency comments are reprinted in appendixes VI, VII, and VIII, respectively. While we made specific recommendations to the Department of Education, all agencies agreed with the recommendations for executive action and discussed their plans to address them.

Education plans to take steps to implement our recommendations to provide information to states on sound data collection strategies, improve feedback and technical assistance to states, and work with other federal agencies to provide IDEA youth with information about federal transition services. Education noted that its plans and actions will depend on legislative changes made to the IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act, and that action to implement our recommendations will be taken after reauthorization of these laws is completed. Education also cautioned that because of variations in the collection and reporting of state data on student graduation, dropouts, and exit examination policies, it is difficult to draw valid conclusions about high school completion outcomes and the effect of exit examinations.

Labor stated that our findings and recommendations substantiated the issues and concerns that it has with regard to transition challenges for youth with disabilities. Labor also described the steps it has taken to address WIA youth program concerns related to program capacity, lack of awareness, and eligibility.

SSA noted that it would continue to work with Education to provide IDEA youth and their families with information about SSA programs, work incentives, and employment supports. SSA also cited its planning efforts that are aimed at promoting employment and economic self-sufficiency involving youth with disabilities.

Education and SSA also provided technical comments, which we incorporated where appropriate.

We will send copies of this report to the Secretaries of Education and Labor, SSA, relevant congressional committees, and other interested parties. Copies will be made available to others upon request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at http://www.gao.gov.

Please contact me at (415) 904-2272 if you or your staff has any questions about this report. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IX.

Sincerely yours,

David D. Bellis
Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

In conducting our work, we administered a mail survey to state Directors of Special Education in all states, conducted telephone interviews with state officials, and visited 3 states. We also reviewed the findings of nationally available studies on transition experiences of students covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), interviewed officials from the U.S. Department of Education (Education), U.S. Department of Labor (Labor), and the Social Security Administration (SSA), who are responsible for programs that can assist students during transition, and analyzed data from these programs. In addition, we interviewed disability advocates and national experts from organizations such as the National Organization on Disability, Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights, and Council for Exceptional Children, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, and National Association of State Directors of Special Education. We performed our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards between June 2002 and June 2003.

Survey

To document state graduation and examination policies pertaining to IDEA youth, challenges experienced by these youth during transition, actions taken by the states to address these challenges, states' assessments of federal resources, as well as to obtain information on state efforts to routinely collect data on these students' postsecondary status, we conducted a mail survey, sending questionnaires to state Directors of Special Education in 50 states. All 50 states responded to our survey. In many states, Directors of Special Education forwarded the survey to other individuals, such as state transition coordinators or education specialists, that they believed to be most knowledgeable about the issues covered in the survey. We analyzed the survey data by calculating descriptive statistics, as well as performing content analysis of the responses to open-ended survey questions.

State Telephone Interviews and Analysis of State Data

To obtain information on states' efforts to collect data on postsecondary employment and education status of IDEA students, we conducted telephone interviews with state officials from 21 states who indicated on our survey that their states routinely collected these data. We contacted individuals in those states that the survey respondents identified as being most knowledgeable about data collection efforts in their states, such as state education officials or university researchers responsible for data collection in the state. To obtain additional information on the data collection methodologies used by the states, as well as to learn about postsecondary status of IDEA students in those states, we also requested

all states participating in the telephone interviews provide their survey instruments and any published materials or other available information reporting students' outcomes.

To obtain information on states' utilization and assessment of federal resources available to assist them in addressing transition problems experienced by IDEA youth, we conducted telephone interviews with state officials in 11 states. We used our survey results to select states that had opposing views on how helpful they believed federal resources were in providing assistance to address transition problems.

Site Visits

To obtain in-depth information on transition experiences of IDEA youth, the challenges they are facing in the course of their transition, the extent to which federal and other programs are available to serve them, and actions taken at the state and local level to address existing transition challenges, we made site visits to 3 states—Alabama, California, and New York. We selected these states to obtain a mix based on differences in geographic location, the size of the IDEA population in the state, high school completion patterns, exit examination policies for IDEA youth in the state, postsecondary data collection efforts, and state monitoring processes, as well as recommendations of experts in transition. We visited 2 local school systems in each state, representing a combination of urban, suburban, and rural areas. (See table 7.) In addition, we consulted with state officials in helping us select local school systems with exemplary transition practices, as well as those that appeared to be struggling in the transition area.

Table 7: Site Visit States and Local School Systems

State	Local school systems
Alabama	Jefferson Auburn
California	Elk GroveSan Francisco Unified
New York	Gowanda Buffalo City

Source: GAO data.

On each visit, we interviewed various stakeholders in the transition process at the state and local levels. At the state level, we typically interviewed Special Education, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and Labor officials, as well as members of the state Steering Committees established

as part of the federal Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process.[1] At the local level, we interviewed school district officials responsible for special education services, school administrators and special education teachers, transition-age IDEA students and parents, community service providers and advocates, and VR, Workforce Investment Act youth program (WIA), and SSA officials responsible for local-level implementation of the VR program, WIA, and the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency (Ticket) program, respectively.

Review of National Studies on Transition

To obtain information on transition problems as well as state and local efforts to address them, we reviewed and summarized the findings of nationally available studies that addressed these issues, including the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the IDEA, the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, and the National Youth Leadership Network 2001-02 Youth Survey. We used a statistician to evaluate these studies for methodological rigor, as well as to determine the extent to which these data could be used to offer a nationwide perspective on transition problems experienced by IDEA youth and on the actions taken by state and local education agencies to address these problems. We determined that the results from SPeNSE might be subject to bias since the nonresponse evaluation for this study was not available at the time of our request. The results of the youth survey presented the views of over 200 youth but did not reflect a nationally representative perspective because respondents were not randomly selected. We included the youth survey in our review because it was reported as the only data collection effort in the country designed and implemented by youth with disabilities.

Analysis of Existing Data

To determine high school completion rates for IDEA students, we obtained data collected from the states by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and summarized in Education's Annual Reports to Congress. We used the 22nd and 23rd Annual Reports to obtain data for 1997-98 and 1998-99 school years. We used OSEP-administered Web site (http://www.ideadata.org) to obtain data for 1999-2000 and 2000-01 school years. In calculating graduation and dropout rates for IDEA youth, we relied on the method in use by OSEP. Specifically, OSEP reports what

[1]We did not interview Steering Committee representatives in California because California did not fully participate in the federal monitoring process.

percentage of IDEA students leave high school with a standard diploma or drop out during a given school year out of the total number of IDEA students who leave high school with a standard diploma or a certificate, drop out, age out, or die during that year. OSEP does not report the certificate rate, but using OSEP's data, we calculated the rate of youth completing with a certificate in the same manner.

To determine high school completion and dropout rates for all students, we looked at an August 2002 published report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), presenting rates of students completing public school with a standard diploma or an alternative credential and dropping out (among states that reported dropouts) for school year 1999-2000. These data were collected by NCES for public school completers and dropouts through its Common Core of Data system.

We obtained information on states' exit examination policies from the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition and the National Center on Education Outcomes. We used that information to update Education's analysis of completion and dropout rates for IDEA students in states with and without exit examinations. Education's analysis did not differentiate between states that had exit examination policies in general and those that had fully implemented those policies by requiring all graduating seniors to participate in the examination in order to graduate. When we repeated Education's analysis, we defined exit examination states only as those that had required all graduating seniors to fully participate in the exit examination by 2000-01. These states were: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina, and Texas.

To determine how many youth participated in the VR, WIA, and Ticket programs, we analyzed data provided by Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), Labor's Employment and Training Administration, and SSA. Because VR participation data only reflected the number of youth exited, we obtained from RSA and the Council for State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation an estimated number of youth enrolled for services. We also analyzed data from RSA on types of services provided to youth.

Appendix II: State Data Collection Efforts

Table 8 shows various entities responsible for collecting data, costs of data collection efforts, and funding sources used by 21 states that routinely collected data on postsecondary employment and education status of IDEA youth.

Table 8: State Approaches to Collecting Data on Postsecondary Employment and Education Status of IDEA Youth

	Data collectors					Cost of effort	
State	State or local school systems	Regional Resource Center	University partner	Nonprofit agency	Private contractor	Cost of data collection and analysis	Funding source
Alabama	•		•			Respondent did not know	Federal State Improvement Grant (SIG) funding until 2002; state and Auburn University funds
California	•					Respondent did not know	IDEA and state funds
Delaware					•	$5 per student follow-up survey sent (approx. $4,020 total cost for following up with the class of 1999)	SIG funds initially; state funds beginning in 2003
Florida	•					Approximately $400,000 for the 2002-03 effort to track about 6 million individuals	State funds
Georgia	•					Respondent did not know	Local school system funds used for data collection; IDEA funds used for state-level data analysis
Idaho					•	Less than $10 per student for 5 years of follow-up ($7,900 total for following up with the class of 2002)	IDEA funds
Indiana	•					Approximately $75,000 annually for state and district efforts	IDEA funds
Kentucky	•				Planned	Respondent did not know	State funds

	Data collectors					Cost of effort	
State	State or local school systems	Regional Resource Center	University partner	Nonprofit agency	Private contractor	Cost of data collection and analysis	Funding source
Maryland	•					Respondent did not know	Future funding source not yet determined
Michigan	•				•	Estimated $35,000 for one-time follow-up with students graduating between December 2000 and November 2001	SIG funds
Missouri	•					Respondent did not know	State and federal (IDEA, Vocational, and Title I) funds
Nebraska	•					Districts receive $40 per student from the state for follow-up	IDEA funds
New York	•		•			Approximately $75 per student for each follow-up cycle ($2.75 million for a 7-year contract)	IDEA funds
North Dakota			•			$30,000 annually	IDEA funds
Ohio	•	•	•			Estimated $150,000 annually if the effort is extended to the entire state	Federal and state funds, and in-kind university contributions
Texas	•					$220,000 annually for 4-year study	IDEA funds
Utah			•			$80,000 for follow-up with the classes of 1997 and 2000	IDEA funds
Vermont				•		Respondent did not know	IDEA and state funds
Virginia			•			$93,000 for one-time follow-up with the class of 1999	SIG funds
Washington	•		•			Approximately $71,000 per year	IDEA funds

	Data collectors					Cost of effort	
State	State or local school systems	Regional Resource Center	University partner	Nonprofit agency	Private contractor	Cost of data collection and analysis	Funding source
Wisconsin	•		•			First year of the 5-year contract: $50,000 (for follow-up with one group of students) 3rd year: $82,000 (for follow-up with two groups of students). The 5th year will also include two groups of students.	IDEA funds for follow-up during 1st, 3rd, and 5th year of the contract. State funds provided to districts for one additional follow-up during "off years." Districts must use their own funds for any additional follow-ups.

Source: Information provided by state officials, December 2002 through April 2003.

Table 9 presents various methods used by 21 states to routinely collect data on postsecondary employment and education status of IDEA youth. The table provides information on characteristics of students and school systems that states included in their data collection efforts and the time periods at which data were collected.

Table 9: State Methods of Collecting Data on Postsecondary Employment and Education Status of IDEA Youth

	Students included					Data collection times		
State	All students	IDEA youth	Includes dropouts	Includes information on students' disability type	School system or district participation	In-school information	Number of post-high school follow-ups	Points in time when information on students' postsecondary status is collected
Alabama		•	•	• (Self-identification)	Local school systems participating in state transition program (approximately 38 percent of school systems)	Information from 11th grade student survey	One	1 year
California		•		•	Some districts in Workability Program (covering approximately 75 percent of special education students)	Information from student survey	Two	1 year 2 years
Delaware		•	•	•	Full district participation		One	6 months
Florida[a]	•	•	•		Participation of all students who remain in state after they leave school		N/A	Annually
Georgia		•		•	Full district participation		One	February/March after exit
Idaho		•			Full district participation	Information from student exit survey	Three	1 years 3 years 5 years
Indiana		•	•	•	Voluntary district participation (approximately 72 percent of planning districts)	Information from student exit survey	One	4 years
Kentucky	•	Planned after 2004			Full district participation	Information from student exit survey	One	October/November after exit
Maryland[b]	• (Until 2003)	•			Voluntary district participation	Information from student exit survey	One	1 year

State	Students included				School system or district participation	Data collection times		
	All students	IDEA youth	Includes dropouts	Includes information on students' disability type		In-school information	Number of post-high school follow-ups	Points in time when information on students' postsecondary status is collected
Michigan		•	•	•	Full district participation		One	1 to 2 years
Missouri[c]	•	•			Full district participation		One	6 months
Nebraska		•	•	•	Voluntary district participation		One	1 to 1.5 years
New York[d]	•	•		•	Stratified cluster sample; 2000 sample from 74 school districts, 2001 sample from 141 school districts	Information from student exit survey	Three	1 year 3 years 5 years
North Dakota[e]		•	•	•	Voluntary district participation; full participation beginning in 2003	Information from student exit survey	Three	1 year 3 years 5 years
Ohio[f]		•		•	6 samples in districts served by 1 of the state's 16 Special Education Regional Resource Centers	Information from student records	One for each student sample (6 samples total)	1st study year: 1 and 3 years 2nd study year: 3 and 5 years 3rd study year: 1 and 3 years
Texas[g]		•		•	Voluntary district participation		One	For class of 1999 (3 years) For class of 2001 (1 year)
Utah		•	•	•	3 representative samples of students drawn from districts across the state		One or two, depending on study	1st study: class of 1991 at 1 year 2nd study: class of 1997 at 1 year 3rd study: class of 1997 at 5 years and class of 2001 at 1 year

	Students included					Data collection times		
State	All students	IDEA youth	Includes dropouts	Includes information on students' disability type	School system or district participation	In-school information	Number of post-high school follow-ups	Points in time when information on students' postsecondary status is collected
Vermont	•				Full district participation	Information from student exit survey	One	1 year
Virginia		•	•	•	Weighted stratified random sample from participating schools (29 percent of schools participate)		One	Class of 1999 at 2 years
Washington[h]		•		•	Voluntary district participation (approximately 90 percent of districts)	Exit information from student records	One	6 months
Wisconsin		•		•	Representative sample of students (20 percent of IDEA students)	Exit information from student records	Two (studies conducted every other year)	1 year 3 years

Source: Information provided by state officials, December 2002 through April 2003.

[a]Florida does not collect data through surveying. Data are matched across several administrative databases, including: state departments of Education, Corrections, Children and Families; state Agency for Workforce Innovation; and the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, and U.S. Postal Service. The follow-up effort does not include students who leave the state.

[b]Maryland collects data on all students, not specifically on students with disabilities, although it was possible to identify students with disabilities for the class of 2002. Beginning with the class of 2003, only IDEA students will be included in the follow-up effort. In addition, an Anticipated Services Survey is administered to all special education students when they leave high school.

[c]Missouri adds the total numbers of students who are working and who are attending postsecondary school without accounting for those who may be participating in both activities, potentially overestimating the successful transition rate. In addition, nonresponses are often put into the "other" category, thus boosting the response rate.

[d]New York Post School Indicators study is scheduled to last for 7 years. Thereafter, some aspects of the effort may continue.

[e]North Dakota is planning to drop the 5th year of data collection because of a low response rate.

[f]Ohio's current effort is seen as a pilot project. The Ohio Board of Education has called for statewide surveying of IDEA students beginning in 2004.

[g]Texas's follow-up survey effort in 2002 included both the class of 1999 and 2001. The state used three different survey versions to shorten the length of each and encourage student participation.

[h]Washington encourages districts to participate by requiring them to submit information on students' postsecondary status in order to quality for Local Education Area grants.

Figure 4 presents the types of data on IDEA youth's postsecondary employment and education status available in 21 states with routine data collection efforts.

Figure 4: Types of Postsecondary Employment and Education Data Available in States

	Employment							Education								Overall			Other areas		
State	Employed	Employed full-time	Employed part-time	Military	Sheltered workshop	Enrolled in postsecondary education	Enrolled in college or university	4-year college/university	2-year college/community college	Vocational or technical training	Adult education	Completed postsecondary education program	Other postsecondary education	Employed and enrolled in postsecondary education	Why not employed or not in postsecondary education	Living situation	Quality of life	Adult services	High school experience	High school work experience	Transition planning experience
Alabama	●	●	●	●		●	●			●			●		●	●	●		●	●	
California	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●	●			
Delaware	●	●	●	●		●				●			●			●					
Florida	●	●				●	●	●	●	●			●	●				●			
Georgia		●	●		●		●			●				●	●						
Idaho	●	●	●	●				●	●	●						●	●	●	●		
Indiana	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	●	●			
Kentucky	●	●		●			●			●				●							
Maryland	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●			●		●				●		
Michigan	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●			●			●	●				
Missouri	●			●				●	●				●								
Nebraska	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●			●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●
New York	●	●	●	●	●		●			●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	
North Dakota	●	●	●			●										●	●	●	●		
Ohio	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●	●		●			●	●	●	●	●	●
Texas	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●		●
Utah	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	
Vermont		●		●				●	●				●								
Virginia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Washington	●	●	●			●		●	●	●			●	●		●	●	●			●
Wisconsin	●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Source: Information provided by state officials, December 2002 through April 2003.

Table 10 identifies possible uses of data on IDEA students' postsecondary employment and education status, and provides examples from state education officials on how data are being used at the state and local levels for each data use category identified.

Table 10: State Examples of Using Postsecondary Employment and Education Status Data

Type of data use	State example
Providing regular reports on students' outcomes to school systems	**Washington's** postsecondary outcome survey is conducted by a university contractor who sends 2 page outcome summaries to each school district participating in the student follow-up effort. The summaries include comparisons between student outcomes in the district and in the state, as well as results disaggregated by gender, race, and disability type.
Providing feedback to school systems on their performance	**Florida** produces annual reports of students' outcomes that are then used to provide feedback to school districts and schools on the success of their programs. The reports are also used by parents and students in helping them choose local programs that show the greatest success.
Setting baseline for future transition efforts	**Missouri's** improvement plan places a priority on improving postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. As a consequence, the state will use current postsecondary data to set a baseline to measure future progress.
Monitoring compliance with IDEA requirements and delivery of special education services in the state	**Alabama** uses postsecondary outcome data for conducing self-assessment and developing self-improvement plan as part of the state's monitoring effort. A statewide task force of transition experts and transition stakeholders was created to use the outcome data for identifying areas for further improvement and implementing the improvement plan.
Conducting program planning or budgeting at the state level	**Indiana's** Director of the Division of Exceptional Learners uses postsecondary outcome data when negotiating the state budget and determining state appropriations.
Rewarding local school systems	**Kentucky** holds schools accountable for students' transition from high school, and schools with high rates of students experiencing a successful transition outcome may receive financial rewards.
Targeting technical assistance to school districts or schools	**New York** redesigned the technical assistance provided by its seven Transition Coordination Sites, based in part on data from its postsecondary outcome survey. As a result, technical assistance activities were shifted from training conferences to more individualized strategic planning with teams from individual schools. Data are used to identify struggling school districts in order to direct assistance to them.
Assessing or improving transition programs	**Virginia** has incorporated postsecondary outcome data into a study aimed at assessing transition services across the state. When completed, the study will include responses from consumers of transition services (both parents and students), transition specialists, and adult service providers. Outcome data will also be used in a statewide evaluation of middle and secondary education programs for students with disabilities with the goal of improving their academic achievement and postsecondary outcomes.
Conducting monitoring or program planning at the local school system level	**Wisconsin** began collecting postsecondary outcome data in response to a state statute requiring the reporting of student outcomes. By collecting data, school districts not only are able to fulfill this requirement, but also identify specific needs and develop their special education plans to address those needs.

Type of data use	State example
Adding, sustaining, or improving programs at the local school system level	**Maryland's** postsecondary follow-up study helps local school systems develop more effective transition services that are targeted to addressing students' needs. For example, one county found that few students were connected with postsecondary education institutions. In response, county officials established a transition program that emphasizes linkages with community colleges for students while they are still in high school. As a result, students ages 18 to 21 who are still attending high school are able to attend community college computer and physical education courses to help prepare for employment.
Establishing linkages with adult service providers	**California's** transition program staff are able to reconnect with former students while following-up to collect data on their postsecondary status. Students who are not participating in productive work or learning activities or who report other problems are provided with information on potentially beneficial services in the course of the follow-up process.

Source: GAO analysis of data from interviews with state officials, December 2002 through April 2003.

Appendix III: State Waiting Lists for Vocational Rehabilitation Services in Fiscal Year 2001

The table below lists the states that, at the end of fiscal year 2001, had waiting lists for vocational rehabilitation services because the state did not have sufficient funds to serve all individuals who were determined eligible for the program.

State	Number of individuals
Washington	6,245
Wisconsin	5,098
California	3,602
Tennessee	3,166
Pennsylvania	2,949
Kansas	2,855
Louisiana	2,127
Ohio	1,578
New Jersey	1,498
Oklahoma	298
Maine	276
Nebraska	135
Kentucky	132
Illinois	51
Maryland	43
Rhode Island	41
Minnesota	39
Oregon	34
Arkansas	33
Connecticut	16
Georgia	4
Delaware	4
Michigan	3
Mississippi	1
Idaho	1
Total	**30,229**

Source: GAO analysis of data provided by the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration.

Appendix IV: Youth Eligible to Participate in the Ticket Program as of June 2003

The table below shows the number of youth ages 18 to 21 eligible to participate in the first two phases of the Ticket program's implementation.

State	Number
Phase one states: February 2002	
Arizona	3,480
Colorado	1,837
Delaware	541
Florida	11,265
Illinois	10,096
Iowa	2,261
Massachusetts	4,427
New York	12,184
Oklahoma	2,868
Oregon	2,240
South Carolina	2,951
Vermont	516
Wisconsin	3,999
Phase one total	**58,665**
Phase two states: November 2002	
Alaska	417
Arkansas	2,499
Connecticut	1,949
Georgia	5,612
Indiana	4,017
Kansas	1,847
Kentucky	4,540
Louisiana	5,179
Michigan	7,505
Mississippi	3,143
Missouri	4,346
Montana	602
Nevada	1,023
New Hampshire	719
New Jersey	4,187
New Mexico	1,466
North Dakota	341
South Dakota	569

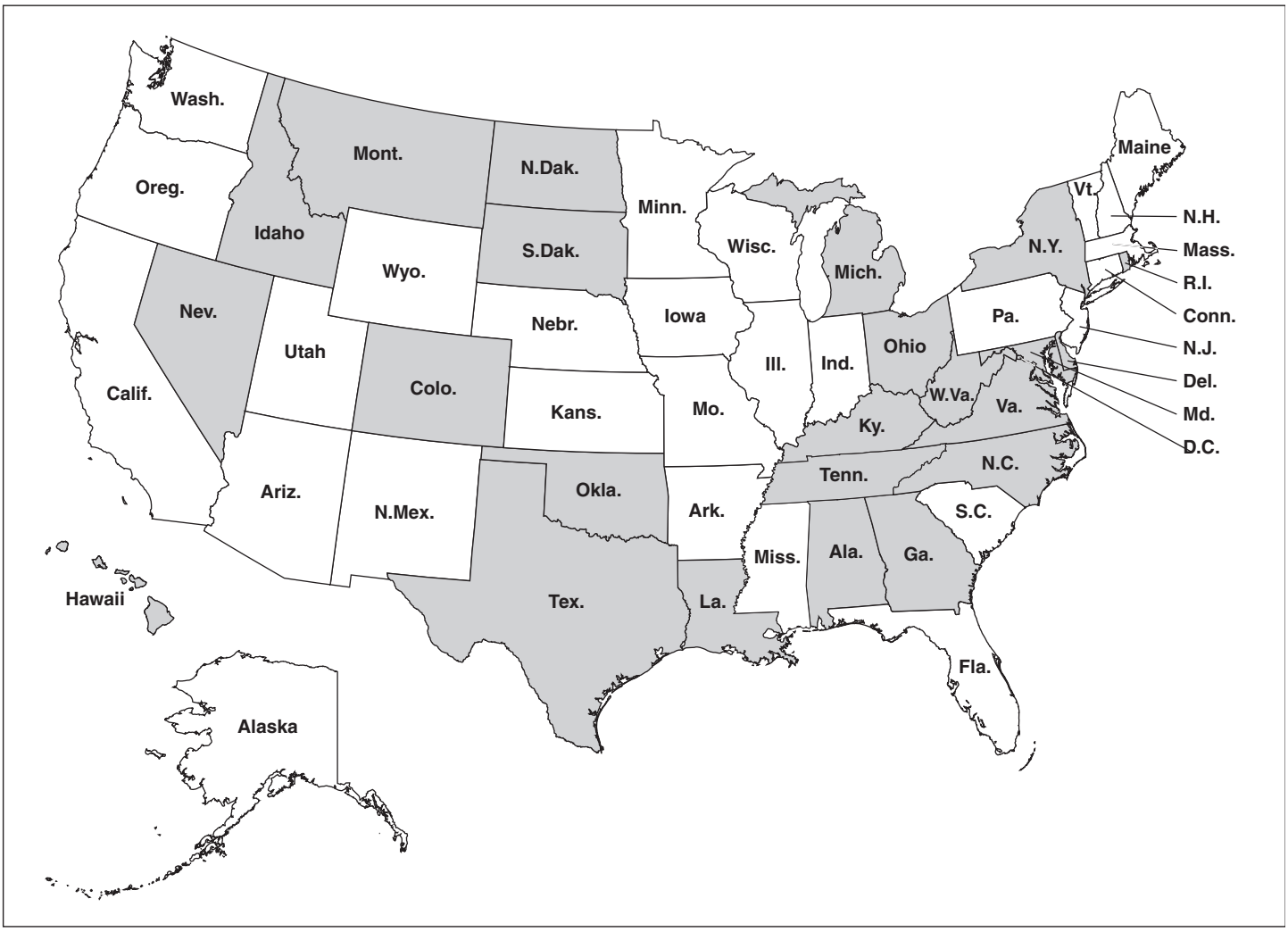
State	Number
Tennessee	4,290
Virginia	4,382
District of Columbia	519
Phase two total	**59,152**

Source: GAO analysis of data provided by the Social Security Administration.

Note: The Social Security Administration plans to implement the program in the remaining 17 states and the U.S. territories by 2004.

Appendix V: Availability of Medicaid Buy-In to Working People with Disabilities as of May 2003

The map below shows which states offer working people with disabilities the opportunity to maintain Medicaid benefits while receiving income from work.



Available

Not Available

Source: Social Security Administration.

Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Education

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JUL 7 2003

Mr. David D. Bellis
Director
Education, Workforce, and Income
Security Issues
United Sates General General
Accounting Office
Washington D.C. 20548

Dear Director Bellis:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on your draft report entitled SPECIAL EDUCATION: Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth (GAO-03-773). I am responding to you on behalf of the Department of Education.

We agree in principle with the draft report's recommendations for Executive Action and we plan to take steps to implement them. In summary, the recommendations for Executive Action by the Department of Education are: (1) provide information to States on sound strategies for the collection of data on the educational status and postsecondary outcomes of IDEA youth in order to expand the availability and use of these data for program improvement; (2) develop a plan to improve feedback on State action plans to address transition problems and ensure consistent technical assistance to States; and (3) take a lead role in working with other Federal agencies to develop strategies using the transition planning process to provide IDEA youth and their families with information about Federally funded transition services.

As you are aware, both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Rehabilitation Act are in the process of being reauthorized. Transition is an area that is receiving attention in this process and the Department is working with the Congress to improve transition services and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

Obviously, our plans and actions for improved feedback and technical assistance to States and other Federal agencies will be to a large extent dependent upon legislative changes now underway. Revisions in program data collection will be made as needed after these laws are reauthorized. This process will provide an opportunity to consider how best to use transition data for program improvement purposes as you have recommended.

400 MARYLAND AVE., S.W. WASHINGTON, D.C. 20202-2500

Our mission is to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the Nation.

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As is customary, we are also providing our detailed technical and editorial comments and suggestions for your consideration as an enclosure to this letter. We believe that the report summary, *Results in Brief,* should caution the reader that variations in the collection and reporting of State data on student graduation, dropouts, and exit exam policies make it difficult to draw valid conclusions about high school completion outcomes and the effect of exit examinations.

Sincerely yours,

Robert H. Pasternack, Ph.D.

Enclosure

Appendix VII: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210

JUL 17 2003

Mr. David D. Bellis
Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues
United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 10548

Dear Mr. Bellis:

On behalf of the Secretary of Labor, we thank you for the opportunity to review the draft of your proposed report, Special Education: Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth (GAO-03-773).

We agree with the report's Recommendation for Executive Action, proposing that federal agencies, including the Department of Labor, work with the Department of Education, to develop strategies for using the federally mandated high school transition planning process to provide youth and their families with information about various federally funded transition services. The findings and recommendations cited in the report substantiate the issues and concerns that we have with regard to transition challenges for youth with disabilities.

The report also cites several areas of concern regarding the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth programs. The issue areas are: (1) program capacity; (2) lack of awareness of available federal services; and (3) eligibility. This letter elaborates the steps that the Department has taken to address the issues identified in the report; our response to each specific issue is articulated below.

Program Capacity

Recently, the Department's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) and the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) implemented three technical assistance centers—National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), National Center on Workforce and Disability for Adults (NCWD/Adults), and the Training and Technical Assistance to Providers (T-TAP). Each technical assistance center includes partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, employer linkages and workforce development issues. The technical assistance centers were

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awarded in 2001-2002, and are in their beginning phases of operations. It is the intention of the Department that these technical assistance centers will provide training, information, and research to help workforce development systems serve adults and youth with disabilities more effectively and appropriately. The centers' program design includes ongoing assessment among key constituent groups to ensure maximum appropriateness and effectiveness of technical assistance as well as training. The effective practices gathered from the centers will serve as models for providing quality services to youth with disabilities.

In addition, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2001 and Fiscal Year (FY) 2002, through its Innovative Demonstration Grants for Youth Initiative, ODEP awarded approximately $7.5 million to fund model demonstration programs designed to enhance the capacity of WIA youth programs to better serve youth with disabilities. ODEP also funds High School/High Tech (HS/HT), a series of nationally established model programs designed to provide young people with disabilities opportunities to explore their interest in pursuing further education leading to technology-related careers. New HS/HT programs must be operated either in partnership with, or led by, a WIA youth program. In addition, states are provided funds to develop statewide HS/HT infrastructures and operations for youth services provided through the One-Stop Center system.

Lack of Awareness

NCWD/Youth has a Youth and Family Practice Network whose membership is comprised of youth and parents of youth with disabilities. The Network receives information on federal programs that provide services to youth with disabilities in addition to being involved in the development of policy and information disability briefs that are disseminated to the workforce investment system.

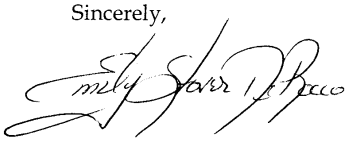
Furthermore, the Department has conducted peer to peer training on serving youth with emotional, mental and learning disabilities for the Youth Opportunity grantees. ETA continues to work with ODEP on increasing the knowledge base and providing technical assistance on the provision of services to youth with disabilities in the WIA youth programs.

Eligibility

Though WIA services are primarily designed to serve low income populations, the Act does allow up to five percent of the youth participants served by WIA youth programs to be individuals who do not meet the income criterion for eligible youth, provided that they are within one of several categories, which include those youth that have one or more disabilities, including learning disabilities. The Department remains committed to improving services to youth with disabilities under the current law and the proposed WIA reauthorization legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this report on how to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth with disabilities.

Sincerely,



Emily Stover DeRocco

Appendix VIII: Comments from the Social Security Administration

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Commissioner

July 2, 2003

Mr. David D. Bellis
Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Bellis:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the draft report "SPECIAL EDUCATION: Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth" (GAO-03-773).

We agree with the report's major findings and recommendations. In particular, we agree with the recommendation that the Department of Education (DOE) coordinate with other federal agencies to provide Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) students and their families with information on federally funded transition services.

SSA will continue to work with DOE to provide information to IDEA students and families on SSA programs, work incentives and employment supports. In addition, we are planning demonstration projects involving youth with disabilities that will focus on postsecondary outcomes including employment and economic self-sufficiency.

As part of the strategy to support the President's New Freedom Initiative goal of increasing employment of people with disabilities, SSA will award cooperative agreements to a number of States for the purpose of helping youth with disabilities to maximize their economic self-sufficiency as they transition from school to work. These projects will focus on youth who are Supplemental Security Income (SSI) beneficiaries or who are otherwise likely to become SSI beneficiaries at age 18. The projects will be designed to increase the coordination of various service, education and benefit programs for such youth and to promote youth participation in activities that prepare them for independence, result in school completion and lead to workforce participation.

We believe that these efforts will significantly improve the coordination among the many federally funded transition services.

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION BALTIMORE MD 21235-0001

Page 2 – Mr. David D. Bellis

Enclosed, please find our technical comments. If you have any questions, please have your staff contact Mark Zelenka at (410) 965-1957.

Sincerely,

Jo Anne B. Barnhart

Enclosure

Appendix IX: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

Lacinda Ayers (206) 654-5591
Tranchau Nguyen (202) 512-2660

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above, Natalya Bolshun, Julianne Hartman Cutts, Molly Laster, and Adam Roye made key contributions to this report. Barbara Alsip, Carl Barden, Carolyn Boyce, Stefanie Bzdusek, Patrick DiBattista, Behn Kelly, and John Smale also provided key technical assistance.

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