

June 2006

SUMMARY OF A GAO CONFERENCE

Helping California Youths with Disabilities Transition to Work or Postsecondary Education



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Highlights of [GAO-06-759SP](#) a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Convened This Conference

The federal government plays a significant role in supporting youths with disabilities, many of whom research has shown are less likely than other students to successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment. Federal programs make considerable investments in providing transition services for youths with disabilities, often through state and local agencies. GAO has previously reported problems in how these programs support transition, such as difficulties youths with disabilities may experience in accessing services.

To better understand how federal programs interact at the state and local levels to support transitioning youths with disabilities, on November 15, 2005, GAO convened a conference of professionals and state and local program experts who are directly involved with transitioning youths with disabilities in California. While the perspectives offered were limited to one state's experience, California has wide variation in population, industry, disability rates, and employment rates among its counties, and thus may offer lessons to other states about the challenges and successes in serving transitioning youths. This report summarizes the views of panelists on challenges they experienced serving this population during critical transition years, and identifies several practices that they believe are helping to address those challenges in California.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-759SP.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert E. Robertson, Director, (202) 512-7215, robertsonr@gao.gov.

SUMMARY OF A GAO CONFERENCE

Helping California Youths with Disabilities Transition to Work or Postsecondary Education

What Panelists Said

Panelists offered a variety of perspectives on the challenges they faced serving youths with disabilities making the transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment. Participants reached general agreement in two broad areas.

- Panelists generally agreed youths with disabilities in California do not receive sufficient training in vocational preparation, life skills, and transition planning. While acknowledging the recent emphasis on learning academic skills and its importance for all youths with disabilities, panelists noted that for those who will not pursue postsecondary education, there are too few vocational programs in high school and inadequate time during school to study vocational and life skills. They suggested many ways to address these challenges, including beginning transition planning at a younger age, creating internship programs during high school, and bringing in mentors from the working world.
- Panelists generally agreed that limited coordination among programs and differences in program structure prevented the seamless provision of services. For example, several panelists noted that students are generally not able to retain school-provided assistive technology equipment that could help them with postsecondary school or employment, and often need to reacquire such technology through the support of another service provider after they graduate. Panelists also cited specific differences in the structure of programs—such as the use of different definitions of learning disabilities between high schools and community colleges—that they thought hindered the seamless provision of services. Panelists suggested ideas for improving coordination among programs, including designating days outside of the classroom for teachers to coordinate with other programs and adopting common assessment materials and, where feasible, common definitions of disability.

Panelists also shared examples of programs currently available to a limited number of youths in California that had the potential to address some of the challenges they identified. For example, some programs provide work experience and career counseling. Other programs provide a case manager to work with students throughout their transition and help coordinate their services. Panelists suggested that expanding and replicating these practices could improve the transition outcomes of youths with disabilities.

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

June 20, 2006

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

The Honorable Howard P. “Buck” McKeon
Chairman
The Honorable George Miller
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Education and the Workforce
House of Representatives

The Honorable William M. Thomas
Chairman
The Honorable Charles B. Rangel
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives

The federal government plays a significant role in supporting youths with disabilities, many of whom research has shown are less likely than other students to successfully make the transition into postsecondary education or employment once they leave high school. Although the amount spent to support transitioning youths with disabilities is not known, the federal government has a considerable investment in various programs to help support these youths. For example, in 2005 the Department of Education (Education) allocated over \$10.5 billion in federal grants to states for ensuring that 6.8 million youths with disabilities received a free and appropriate public education, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA)—a key piece of legislation pertaining to transition.

A number of other federal programs—largely administered at the state and local levels—endeavor to help youths with disabilities achieve successful transitions. For example:

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- Education’s vocational rehabilitation (VR) program provides transition services to youths with disabilities through state VR agencies and in coordination with public education officials.
 - The Department of Labor (Labor) helps eligible youths between 14 and 21 years of age¹ prepare for work or postsecondary education through its one-stop center system—a federally funded workforce investment system that is managed by states and localities.
 - The Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency program (Ticket) helps individuals who are receiving cash benefits from SSA’s Supplemental Security Income Program and are between the ages of 18 and 64 to obtain services—from providers such as VR agencies—that are necessary to find, enter, and retain employment.

The success of these programs can play an important role in determining whether vulnerable youths transition successfully to become independent adults or face a lifetime of reliance on public assistance. However, GAO has previously reported problems with how these programs support transition, such as difficulties youths may experience in accessing services.²

To better understand how federal programs support transitioning students with disabilities, GAO held a conference on November 15, 2005, that focused on such supports in one state—California.³ We chose to focus on one state in order to better explore the complex interplay of the many and varied federal programs that are administered at the state and local levels and serve this population. California presents an interesting case study because of the wide variation in population, industry, rate of disability, and employment rates among its counties. As such, California’s experiences may provide a basis for identifying challenges and promising approaches to serving transitioning youths with disabilities that could apply to other states.

¹ Youths generally must have a low income in order to be eligible for one-stop services. However, some exceptions are made for a small percentage of youths with disabilities.

² GAO, *Special Education: Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth*, [GAO-03-773](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2003).

³ The conference took place in GAO’s San Francisco field office and via a video teleconference.

To identify discussion themes as well as panel participants for this conference, we interviewed officials from federal, state, and local disability programs; special education teachers and administrators; researchers in this area; and disability advocates. We also reviewed program guidance, published articles, and GAO reports relating to disability and transitioning youths.⁴ In light of the many federal programs that provide similar services in support of transitioning youths, we invited to the conference officials from Education, Labor, and SSA to observe the proceedings and engage in a direct dialogue with transition professionals. We also invited congressional staff from committees with jurisdiction over some of these federal agencies and programs to provide their perspectives on the topic.

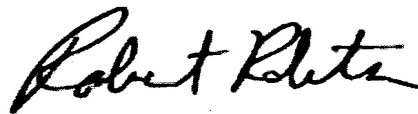
Recognizing the importance of this topic for policy makers, we have summarized the conference proceedings in this report on behalf of interested committees from both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. The discussion summarized in this report does not necessarily represent the views of any individual participant or GAO, may not be applicable to other parts of the country, and does not attempt to provide a comprehensive treatment of the topic. For example, although the topic of preparing for postsecondary education was included in the conference agenda, the panelists' discussions focused primarily on workforce preparation.

In summary, panelists generally agreed that challenges exist for transitioning California youths with disabilities in two key areas. First, they noted that the education system as they experience it in California does not provide adequate training in vocational and life skills or transition preparation for students with disabilities. While acknowledging the importance of academic studies, the panelists noted that for those youths who will not pursue postsecondary education, there are few vocational programs in high school and inadequate time during school to study vocational and life skills. Second, panelists indicated that lack of coordination and differences in program structure between organizations responsible for assisting these youths hinder the seamless provision of services. For each challenge area, panelists identified suggestions for improvement. Panelists also identified several ongoing practices that they believe hold promise for addressing these challenges in California.

⁴ Most notably, [GAO-03-773](#).

Appendix I summarizes the collective discussion, as well as subsequent comments we received from panel participants on the draft summary of the conference proceedings. Appendix II lists our panel participants and observers from federal agencies. Appendix III contains our agenda—including a list of congressional staff who provided Hill perspectives on this topic—as well as the general themes and questions posed to panelists. Major contributors are acknowledged in appendix IV.

We are very grateful to all of the conference participants for taking the time to share their knowledge, insights, and perspectives. The views expressed will be of value to the community of federal, state and local programs and professionals as they strive to improve employment and postsecondary educational outcomes for youths with disabilities at a critical juncture in their lives. In addition, the results of this discussion may help Congress ensure that federal programs serve this vulnerable population effectively and improve federal disability programs to meet the needs of the 21st century.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert Robertson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robert" and last name "Robertson" clearly distinguishable.

Robert E. Robertson
Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Summary of the Conference Discussion

Conference panelists offered a variety of perspectives on the challenges they faced serving youths with disabilities transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment. This appendix provides background on the issues discussed by the panelists and a summary of their discussion.

Background

In 2003, we designated modernizing federal disability programs as a high-risk area—one that requires urgent attention and organizational transformation to ensure that programs function in the most economical, efficient, and effective manner possible to meet the needs of individuals in the 21st century. Federal disability programs were placed on the list because many of these programs have yet to incorporate scientific advances and economic and social changes that have redefined the relationship between impairments and the ability to work.¹ In addition, these programs have faced long-standing challenges in ensuring the timeliness and consistency of decisions related to benefits and services for people with disabilities. As part of our work in this area, in 2005, we identified more than 20 federal agencies and almost 200 programs that serve people with disabilities, many of which play some role in serving transitioning youths with disabilities.²

The array of programs supporting transitioning youths with disabilities, in some ways, reflects the wide diversity of this population. For example, youths with disabilities can have a wide range of physical and cognitive disabilities that can affect their ability to learn. In addition, they may demonstrate varying levels of academic aptitude and achievement in different areas. Consequently, youths with disabilities may require different strategies for transitioning from school to postsecondary education or the workforce that address their unique needs.

One key piece of legislation pertaining to transitioning youths with disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA).³ In 2005, under IDEA, states received over \$10.5 billion for ensuring that 6.8 million youths identified as having a learning disability or

¹ GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-03-119](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2003).

² GAO, *Federal Disability Assistance: Wide Array of Programs Needs to Be Examined in Light of 21st Century Challenges*, [GAO-05-626](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 2, 2005).

³ 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et. seq.*

a disability such as mental retardation or autism received a free and appropriate public education. Among other requirements, IDEA requires all children with disabilities to be included in all general state and districtwide assessments,⁴ including annual assessments under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.⁵ IDEA also charges public education authorities to develop an individualized education program⁶ (IEP) for each eligible student that spells out the specific special education and supplementary aids and services to be provided based on the student's needs. Beginning no later than when a student is 16, the IEP must also contain transition plans that include measurable postsecondary goals and specify the transition services needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.

In addition, the federal government funds many other services that may assist youths with disabilities during their transition period through programs administered by agencies such as the Department of Education (Education), the Department of Labor (Labor), and the Social Security Administration (SSA). For example, the vocational rehabilitation (VR) program, Workforce Investment Act youth program (WIA), and the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency program (Ticket) all provide services that can ease youth transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment. Youths who are eligible for special education services under IDEA, however, are not automatically eligible for these education, employment, and support services.

Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration provides significant funds to state VR agencies in the form of a matching grant to help persons with disabilities prepare for and engage in gainful employment. The vocational rehabilitation services that state-run VR programs provide include a variety of vocational services, including job training, postsecondary education, and career counseling. Under the VR program, all people with a physical or mental impairment are potentially eligible for

⁴ 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(16).

⁵ The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires school systems to establish annual assessments in order to demonstrate that all students, including those with disabilities, make academic progress. Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 1111(b) (2002).

⁶ The term "individualized education program" refers to a written statement that is developed for each student that specifies, among other components, the services that the student will receive, the extent to which the student will participate in the regular education setting with peers without disabilities, and how the student will participate in statewide assessments.

services, but states must serve those with the most significant disabilities first in times of funding constraint.⁷ This means that sometimes VR agencies are not able to serve all youths with disabilities, including those eligible for special education services. However, federal regulations under the Rehabilitation Act require state VR agencies to coordinate with public education officials to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from school to work.⁸

Labor oversees the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. WIA requires states and localities to bring together most federally funded employment and training services into a single system, called the one-stop center system. WIA requires one-stop centers to offer services to all eligible youths between 14 and 21 years of age that prepare them for work or postsecondary education. To be eligible for services under WIA, a youth must have a low income and also meet at least one of six specific barriers to employment, one of which is having a disability. Exceptions to the income requirement, however, are available for a small percentage of youths, including those with disabilities.⁹

SSA implements the nation's two largest cash benefit programs for individuals with disabilities, one of which covers youths under 18. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a means-tested income assistance program that provides monthly payments to adults or children who are blind or have other disabilities and whose income and assets fall below a

⁷ As in the case with California, state VR agencies that are not able to serve all eligible individuals applying for services are required to develop criteria for ensuring that individuals with the most significant disabilities will be selected first for services. Federal regulations do not stipulate, however, the definition of "most significant disability," leading states to define the term in a variety of ways.

⁸ Specifically, federal regulations require state VR programs to develop an individualized plan for employment for all clients accepted into the VR program. For VR clients who are also students receiving special education services, VR is required to have this plan in place before they leave school, and to develop VR goals, objectives, and services that are consistent with those stipulated in their IEP.

⁹ Under WIA, youths are eligible for services if they have a low income and they fall within one or more of the following categories: deficient in basic skills; school dropout, homeless, runaway, or foster child; pregnant or parenting; offender; or individual (including a youth with a disability) who requires additional assistance to obtain employment. Income qualification can be waived for up to 5 percent of youths in a local area. A 2003 GAO report found that about 29 percent of IDEA youths meet WIA's low-income requirement. See [GAO-03-773](#).

certain level.¹⁰ Eligibility for SSI, in many states, entitles beneficiaries to Medicaid insurance coverage. In addition to providing cash benefits that may assist SSI-eligible youths in transition, 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 individuals with disabilities who are receiving cash benefits from SSA and are between 18 and 64 years of age to obtain the services necessary to find, enter, and retain employment.

A number of nonfederal agencies play a role in providing many of these federally funded services as well as additional transition services to youths with disabilities. For example, California Departments of Education, Rehabilitation, Employment Development, Developmental Services, Mental Health, and Social Services provide a wide range of federally supported transition services including education, vocational skills training, and supported employment and independent living services. In addition, local education authorities and other local and nongovernmental organizations obtain funding from a variety of sources to provide transition services, including vocational training, assisting with job searches, and making referrals for services.

¹⁰ The other SSA program is the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program, which provides monthly payments to workers with disabilities (and their dependents or survivors) under the age of 65 who have enough work experience to qualify for disability benefits.

Panelists Discussed Need for Additional Vocational Training, Life Skills Development, and Transition Preparation among Youths with Disabilities in California

Panelists raised concerns that California's education system does not provide students with disabilities with adequate training in vocational and life skills or in transition preparation. While acknowledging the importance of academic studies, they noted that for those youths who will not pursue postsecondary education, there are few vocational programs in high school and inadequate time during school to study vocational and life skills.¹¹ They also suggested several ways that schools and service providers could improve the provision of these services.

According to the panelists, the education system in California does not adequately emphasize vocational skills, leaving many youths unprepared for the workforce. While some students with disabilities continue on to postsecondary education, this is not a realistic option for many others who either transition into the workforce immediately after high school or remain at home pursuing neither postsecondary education nor work. These youths might want to enter the workforce but might not be prepared for work because they may not have received adequate vocational instruction during high school, such as supervised work experience or training in skills for a specific career, like the culinary arts.¹² Panelists noted that while most students with disabilities entering the workforce will need the academic skills emphasized in schools, vocational skills and training that these students may also need currently receive little attention in the education system. For example, vocational training is mostly offered through adult education providers, such as community colleges, and vocational high school diplomas are not widely available. Consequently, youths desiring vocational instruction might drop out of high school. Federal policy emphasizes accountability for academic achievement for all students, including those with disabilities.¹³ Most students with disabilities are expected to meet the same academic standards as those without disabilities. Panelists noted that since some students with disabilities require more instruction time to meet those standards, there is less time for teachers and students to spend on

¹¹ The panelists' discussion was limited to youths with disabilities, although it may be true that vocational programs are not widely available and could be beneficial for all high schools students, not just those with disabilities.

¹² A 2003 GAO report also found that while vocational training and experience in high school lead to more successful transitions for some youths with disabilities, many do not receive these services. See [GAO-03-773](#).

¹³ Over the past decade, Congress has passed laws that emphasize greater state and local accountability for improving graduation rates and postsecondary results for youths, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

vocational coursework. In some cases, this has led schools to offer fewer vocational courses.

In addition to discussing vocational skills, panelists said that students with disabilities need more training in life skills, such as self-advocacy and interpersonal communication, to help them pursue postsecondary education, secure employment, or obtain necessary services as adults. For example, panelists noted that without self-advocacy training, youths with disabilities might fail to seek out the support services they need after high school, either because they do not understand the programs and eligibility rules or are hesitant to come forward about their disabilities. Another panelist said that youths with disabilities are sometimes reluctant to speak up in groups or initiate conversations. This might lead them to miss out on job opportunities if they are unable to effectively communicate with employers to alleviate any concerns about their abilities or discuss needed accommodations. Further, the panelists said that employers sought out employees with life skills or soft skills, such as willingness to learn and to work hard and appropriate behavior. However, panelists found that learning life skills, similar to vocational skills, were often de-emphasized in favor of learning academic content. One panelist said that students in his school must study life skills either before or after the regular school day because there was no other time left in their schedules for such study.

Panelists also said that in a variety of ways, the education system does not provide many students with disabilities with adequate preparation for their transition into the workplace or postsecondary education. For example, California credential programs for teachers, including special educators, do not require training in transition preparation, such as how to teach students to connect with employment services or how to integrate career preparation into an academic curriculum. Panelists also said that teachers have few professional development days available to take training in transition preparation. Another problem that many panelists brought up was that recent federal legislation increased the age—from 14 to 16—that students are required to begin planning for their transitions in their IEP meetings. Several panelists stated that increasing the minimum age sent a message to administrators, teachers, and parents that transition planning is unimportant. Two panelists noted that while schools can begin planning for transition at an earlier age, scarce monetary and time resources make it unlikely that transition services would be offered earlier than required. Others suggested that birth or kindergarten was not too early to start thinking about a student's transition period, noting that many students with disabilities are in danger of dropping out before age 16. Further, one panelist pointed out that students with disabilities, especially younger

students, often do not attend their IEP meetings. Others said that the IEP process, including transition planning, could be more successful if students were given more opportunities to advocate for their own needs in their IEP meetings and to work toward long-term goals linked to adult outcomes from an early age.

Panelists suggested several ways that schools could improve the vocational, life skills, and transition preparation that students received. Some panelists said that students should be taught the basic skills that employers value and that correlate with essential job duties. Others suggested that students needed more vocational training and interaction with the working world while in high school. They noted that mentors from the business world get students interested in careers, serve as successful role models, and help students succeed in transitioning to work.¹⁴ They also praised the value of internships and other school-sponsored workplace learning opportunities and suggested that students with disabilities needed more of these opportunities before they finished high school.¹⁵ Panelists suggested that students could learn self-advocacy skills by educating other youths about their disabilities, as well as by becoming more involved in their IEPs. Regarding transition preparation, panelists recommended that transition training should be incorporated into the first level of credential requirements for teachers, and that federal agencies could recommend that states add this requirement to their credentials. Finally, panelists agreed that transition planning should begin before age 16.

¹⁴ For more information on mentoring programs, see GAO, *At-Risk Youth: Student Mentoring Programs: Education's Monitoring and Information Sharing Could Be Improved*, [GAO-04-581](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 25, 2004).

¹⁵ For more information on school-community collaboration, see GAO, *At-Risk Youth: School-Community Collaborations Focus on Improving Student Outcomes*, [GAO-01-66](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct 10, 2000).

Panelists Discussed How Limited Coordination among Programs and Differences in Program Structure Can Prevent the Seamless Provision of Transition Services

Panelists indicated that the lack of coordination and differences in program structure among organizations that assist transitioning youths with disabilities prevent the seamless provision of services. They had several ideas for improving coordination among these organizations.

The panelists noted that limited coordination among the multiple organizations involved in providing services to youths with disabilities hinders the transition process for youths in California. Many thought that collaboration between school districts and outside organizations needs to be improved.¹⁶ One panelist noted, for example, that schools do not always involve government agencies or community-based organizations in the development of a student's IEP, thereby missing an opportunity to educate youths and outside programs on issues related to transition. Other panelists noted that students generally are not able to retain school-provided assistive technology equipment, such as voice-to-text software, after they leave school; as a result, the support of other service providers may be required to help these students reacquire technology to assist them with postsecondary education or employment. Panelists said that after youths leave school, no single agency is in charge of providing services to all youths. Instead, one panelist said, youths are expected to manage the services they receive on their own, but might not have adequate information on the availability of benefits or program eligibility requirements.¹⁷ Further, the panelist said, organizations that provide services to youths with disabilities after they leave school are often responsible for assisting a broader population and might lack the expertise and sensitivity for serving individuals with disabilities.

The panelists indicated that differences in the structure of programs—including their eligibility criteria, disability definitions, and performance measures—hinder the provision of seamless service to youths with disabilities. For example, according to panelists, differences in eligibility

¹⁶ A 2003 GAO report found that students, parents and teachers also thought schools needed to improve coordination with outside service providers. See [GAO-03-773](#). More generally, other GAO reports have highlighted the need for improved coordination among all federal disability programs. See, for example, [GAO-05-626](#) and GAO, *People with Disabilities: Federal Programs Could Work Together More Efficiently to Promote Employment*, [GAO/HEHS-96-126](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 3, 1996).

¹⁷ A 2005 GAO report found that 38 percent of federal programs assisting individuals with disabilities reported that making clients aware of their programs' services and benefits was a challenge. Similarly, 30 percent of these programs reported that interpreting complex eligibility requirements was a challenge. See [GAO-05-626](#).

criteria can create conflicting incentives for youth who participate in more than one program and can create gaps in service provision. One panelist noted that the eligibility criteria for SSA's Supplemental Security Income program, which require youths to maintain low income and asset levels in order to continue receiving cash benefits and medical insurance, deter youths from fully utilizing employment assistance programs.¹⁸ Another panelist mentioned that not all youths with disabilities meet the income eligibility criteria to receive services from WIA one-stops.¹⁹

Other panelists noted that differences in the definitions of disability lead to gaps in service provision. For example, one panelist said that California high schools and community colleges use different definitions of learning disabilities. Similarly, another panelist said that many youths eligible for IDEA are not eligible to receive services from California's Department of Rehabilitation because the department, constrained for funding, generally restricts its caseload to individuals that meet its definition for "significant" or "most significant" disability. These differences in eligibility criteria and definitions, at best, might result in youths having to be reevaluated or not knowing whether they are eligible to continue receiving services after high school. At worst, they could prevent youths from receiving needed services from postsecondary education institutions, VR, or WIA one-stops.

Another panelist added that some program performance measures deter programs assisting broader populations from serving youths with disabilities. For example, the performance measures for WIA, including measures of the number of clients finding employment, do not distinguish between individuals with and without disabilities. Since assisting individuals with disabilities generally requires more effort and resources than assisting those without disabilities, program staff may choose not to

¹⁸ Similarly, a 2003 GAO report also found that some 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. See [GAO-03-773](#).

¹⁹ However, up to 5 percent of youth served in a local area do not have to meet the income criteria so long as they fall within certain other categories, such as having a disability.

serve individuals with disabilities in order to more easily meet or exceed their performance goals.²⁰

The panelists offered several ideas on ways to improve coordination among organizations involved in serving youths with disabilities. One panelist suggested that primary service providers convene a regional conference to identify roles and responsibilities of different agencies and to develop a comprehensive plan for assisting youths with disabilities. Others thought that school systems could enhance cooperation by designating professional development days for teachers to coordinate with public and private providers and family members. They also thought that schools needed to make a more concerted effort to include provider staff and family members in IEP meetings. Other panelists proposed the designation of a single agency or person to coordinate the provision of services for all youths with disabilities, both in school as well as after students have left high school. Another suggestion, currently implemented at one school district, was to set up agreements between the local education authority and other service providers to reimburse the school system for allowing students to retain their assistive technology.

The panelists also suggested improvements to the ways that programs are structured that may lead to seamless service provision. For example, one panelist suggested that programs be encouraged to provide comprehensive services to youths over a broader age range so that youths could receive many services from a single place. Another panelist proposed that programs use common assessment materials and, whenever possible, common definitions of disability to improve coordination among programs and make it easier for youths to receive needed services. For example, youth should not have to be subjected to different tests in order to establish their eligibility for services being provided by different agencies. Finally, one panelist thought that the federal government, in choosing which programs to fund, should reward programs that have collaborative structures.

²⁰ A 2004 GAO report similarly found that WIA performance measures can create disincentives for one-stops to serve clients with disabilities. See GAO, *Workforce Investment Act: Labor Has Taken Several Actions to Facilitate Access to One-Stops for Persons with Disabilities, but These Efforts May Not Be Sufficient*, [GAO-05-54](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2004). We also recommended that WIA performance measures be changed to take different populations into account. See GAO, *Workforce Investment Act: States and Local Areas Have Developed Strategies to Assess Performance, but Labor Could Do More to Help*, [GAO-04-657](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 1, 2004).

Panelists Identified Several Promising Practices That May Address Challenges in California

Panelists shared examples of programs—available to a limited number of youths—that have the potential to address some of the challenges they identified. Most of these programs operate only in California, but one operates nationwide. These programs are administered either by government entities or nonprofits, and are supported by both public and private funds. They provide such services as vocational training, job placement, case management to help coordinate with different service providers, and leadership opportunities for youths with disabilities. Panelists suggested that if resources were available, expanding and replicating these practices could improve the transition outcomes for youths with disabilities.

- **WorkAbility I:** WorkAbility I is a California program for special education students aged 16 to 22 that is designed to promote career awareness and exploration while students complete their secondary education program. While it is not available in many schools, the program has grown to over 300 sites in all 58 counties in California since its inception in 1981. WorkAbility I provides students with opportunities for job shadowing, paid and nonpaid work experience, and ongoing support and guidance from vocational personnel, as well as coordination of state and local services. The program is funded and administered by the California Department of Education, Special Education Department. Panelists considered WorkAbility I to be a successful vehicle for career preparation and for helping to train special educators in transition planning. One panelist said that this program has increased graduation rates and decreased dropout rates for students with disabilities. Panelists agreed that this program should be expanded so that it is more available to California students with disabilities and that many of its practices should be incorporated into the education system rather than restricted to a separate program.
- **Marriott Foundation Bridges from School to Work:** Bridges works with youths exiting special education to develop job placement with local employers. Operating primarily in major urban centers nationwide, the program serves more than 1,000 people annually. Since its inception in 1990, Bridges has placed more than 7,800 youths in competitive employment nationwide with over 1,500 different employers, and 89 percent of those who successfully complete the program receive offers of ongoing employment. One panelist considered Marriott Bridges to be an excellent example of a transition service provider that collaborates with other programs to help students get good jobs that fit their interests. Another noted that this program helps some youths with visual impairments obtain assistive technology.

- **Jewish Vocational Services (JVS):** JVS's Youth Programs help youths with disabilities in the San Francisco area aged 14 to 24 prepare for employment through vocational assessment, internships, case management, educational and career counseling, computer and life skills classes, and job placement services. JVS also partners with schools to provide vocational education classes and with other government and nonprofit entities to coordinate services. In 2004, JVS worked with 700 youths, including 400 still in school, and helped 346 youths find jobs. Founded in 1973, JVS's nonprofit programs are funded through multiple revenue streams, including federal, state, and local government funds, among other sources. One panelist described JVS programs as providing case management and help with obtaining and coordinating services throughout the youth's entire transition, including after leaving school.
- **Transition Partnership Project (TPP):** The TPP, created by the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) in 1987, encourages partnerships between schools and the department to work toward a seamless transition from school to work or postsecondary education. Most students whom the department classifies as having a significant disability are eligible for the TPP and can begin receiving guidance from department vocational counselors in their junior year of high school. In 2005, there were 85 TPP programs statewide. In 2005, the TPP served 17,524 of the 38,917 DOR consumers who are 24 years of age or younger. (Because of budgetary constraints, DOR cannot serve all 200,000 special education students enrolled in California's high schools.) Panelists said that the TPP is involved in the bulk of successful job placements for youths with disabilities in California, and that its strengths included providing a case manager who works with students from high school until they finish their education and enter the workforce.
- **Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities:** The Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities is an annual career leadership training program for approximately 60 high school juniors and seniors with disabilities in California, who serve as delegates from their communities at a 4-day event in their state capital. Delegates create a personal leadership plan and gain access to resources related to assistive technology, community support, and employment opportunities, with successful adults with disabilities serving as role models. The program is funded and organized by the California's Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Department of Rehabilitation, Employment Development Department, California State Independent Living Council, California

Department of Education, Sonoma State University, California Workforce Investment Board, State Council on Developmental Disabilities, California Foundation for Independent Living Centers and Friends of the California Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Inc. This program is being replicated across the nation by the U.S. Department of Labor. One panelist suggested that the model set forth by the Youth Leadership Forum be followed at the county and city levels to provide students with disabilities more opportunities to learn self-advocacy through leadership.

Appendix II: List of Panel Participants and Observers

List of Panel Participants

- Pauline Aughe, NOVA One Stop
- Dr. Diana Blackmon, Director, Special Services, Washington Unified School District
- Lana Fraser, Assistant Deputy Director, Department of Rehabilitation, CA
- Paul Gibson, Director, Youth Department, Jewish Vocational Services
- Dr. Phyllis Harris, Executive Director, Special Education, Oakland Unified School District
- Dr. Angela Hawkins, Commissioner, California Advisory Commission on Special Education
- Dr. Dennis Kelleher, Transition Coordinator, Department of Education, CA
- Chris Leroy, Program Specialist, San Bernadino City Unified School District
- Fran Lopez, Associate Dean, Disability Resource Center, Gavelin College
- Jodee Mensik, Transition Specialist, Los Angeles Unified School District
- Jeff Riel, Chief, Transition Programs, Department of Rehabilitation, CA
- Richard Rosenberg, Vocational & Training Coordinator, Whittier Union High School District
- Caren Sax, Professor, Interwork Institute at San Diego State University
- Vicki Shadd, Director, Vocation & Transitional Services, Glenn County School District
- Zoey Todd, Children and Family Services Policy Unit, Department of Mental Health, CA
- John Weber, ITOP Coordinator, Support for Families
- Marcia Yamamoto, Manager, Workforce Inclusion Section, Employment Development Department, CA

List of Observers from Federal and Other Agencies

- Rhonda Basha, Department of Labor
- Sandra Beckley, Social Security Administration
- Chris Button, Department of Labor
- Joyanne Cobb, Social Security Administration
- Rachel Dorman, Department of Labor
- Melodie Johnson, Department of Education
- Jamie Kendall, Social Security Administration
- Margaret Mack, California Workforce Investment Board
- Laurel Nishi, Department of Labor
- Linda Rogaski, California Department of Education
- Jennifer Sheehy, Department of Education
- Marlene Simon-Burroughs, Department of Education

Appendix III: Agenda, General Themes, and Questions

Agenda

Tuesday, November 15th, 2005

San Francisco, California

- 8:00 – 8:30 Meet and greet
- 8:30 – 8:45 Welcome, Introductions and Conference Overview
- 8:45 – 9:45 Morning Panel: Helping Youths in School Prepare for Transition
- 9:45 – 10:00 Break
- 10:00 – 11:30 Morning Panel (continued)
- 11:30 – 11:45 Break
- 11:45 – 12:30 Hill Perspectives (via a video teleconference):
 - Aaron Bishop, Majority Staff, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, U.S. Senate
 - Kim Hildred, Majority Staff Director, Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives
 - Joanne Butler, Majority Staff, Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives
 - Sonja Nesbit, Minority Staff, Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives
- 12:30 – 1:00 Question & answer session with congressional staffers
- 1:00 – 2:00 Afternoon Panel: Helping Youths Who Are Out of School Transition to Work or Postsecondary Education
- 2:00 – 2:15 Break
- 2:15 – 3:45 Afternoon Panel (continued)
- 3:45 – 4:00 Concluding remarks and closing

General Themes and Questions

Based on our discussions with you and other panelists, along with a review of the literature, general themes emerged as key challenges to helping youths with disabilities with respect to their transition to postsecondary education or employments. We have grouped these themes according to their relevance to youths who are in and out of school, as follows:

For youths who are in the school setting, we identified the following general themes:

- professional development to help teachers meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities in regular classrooms,
- available and appropriate testing accommodations,
- support to keep students with disabilities in school through graduation, and
- resources and professional development to provide instruction in career and independent living skills.

For youths who are out of school, we identified the following general themes:

- varying eligibility requirements, which create gaps in services (WIA for low income, VR for significant disabilities, secondary versus primary education systems),
- coordination among agencies (who delivers or pays for services, and navigating the web of services once out of school (guidance, outreach),
- absence of peripheral supports (transportation, housing, medical), and
- attitudes and perceptions that inhibit students from achieving successful outcomes (parents, employers).

In preparing for your participation in either the morning or afternoon sessions of the conference, we would like you to think about your experiences as they relate to the above themes by asking yourselves the following questions:

1. **What are some reasons (or root causes) for the challenges?**
2. **Are there any initiatives that are being undertaken to address these challenges or their root causes, and what has been the success of such initiatives?**
3. **What additional efforts should be undertaken to address these challenges or root causes, and by whom?**

We hope that your thinking about these themes prior to the conference will help the group move forward more quickly in setting priorities and in identifying potential best practices and areas where additional support is needed. We look forward to an interesting and lively discussion of the issues and possible resolutions.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Robert E. Robertson, Director, (202) 512-7215 or robertsonr@gao.gov.

Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact above, Director Marnie S. Shaul; Assistant Directors Harriet Ganson and Michele Grgich; and team members Erin Godtland, Arthur T. Merriam, and Brittini Milam made major contributions to this report. In addition, Laurie Latuda and Jonathan McMurray advised on report preparation. Jessica Botsford and Richard Burkard provided legal advice. Danielle Bosquet, Ramona Burton, Shannon Groff, Robert Marek, and Elizabeth Sirois also made important contributions to organizing the conference held November 15, 2005, in San Francisco.

Related GAO Products

Vocational Rehabilitation: Better Measures and Monitoring Could Improve the Performance of the VR Program. [GAO-05-865](#). Washington, D.C.: September 23, 2005.

No Child Left Behind Act: Education Could Do More to Help States Better Define Graduation Rates and Improve Knowledge about Intervention Strategies. [GAO-05-879](#). Washington, D.C.: September 20, 2005.

No Child Left Behind Act: Most Students with Disabilities Participated in Statewide Assessments, but Inclusion Options Could Be Improved. [GAO-05-618](#). Washington, D.C.: July 20, 2005.

Federal Disability Assistance: Wide Array of Programs Needs to Be Examined in Light of 21st Century Challenges. [GAO-05-626](#). Washington, D.C.: June 2, 2005.

Social Security Administration: Better Planning Could Make the Ticket Program More Effective. [GAO-05-248](#). Washington, D.C.: March 2, 2005.

Workforce Investment Act: Labor Has Taken Several Actions to Facilitate Access to One-Stops for Persons with Disabilities, but These Efforts May Not Be Sufficient. [GAO-05-54](#). Washington, D.C.: December 14, 2004.

No Child Left Behind Act: Improvements Needed in Education's Process for Tracking States' Implementation of Key Provisions. [GAO-04-734](#). Washington, D.C.: September 30, 2004.

Student Mentoring Programs: Education's Monitoring and Information Sharing Could Be Improved. [GAO-04-581](#). Washington, D.C.: June 25, 2004.

Special Education: Additional Assistance and Better Coordination Needed among Education Offices to Help States Meet the NCLBA Teacher Requirements. [GAO-04-659](#). Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2004.

Workforce Investment Act: States and Local Areas Have Developed Strategies to Assess Performance, but Labor Could Do More to Help. [GAO-04-657](#). Washington, D.C.: June 1, 2004.

Special Education: Federal Actions Can Assist States in Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Youth. [GAO-03-773](#). Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2003.

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High-Risk Series: An Update. [GAO-03-119](#). Washington, D.C.: January 2003.

Business Tax Incentives: Incentives to Employ Workers with Disabilities Receive Limited Use and Have an Uncertain Impact. [GAO-03-39](#). Washington, D.C.: December 11, 2002.

At-Risk Youth: School-Community Collaborations Focus on Improving Student Outcomes. [GAO-01-66](#). Washington, D.C.: October 10, 2000.

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