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Article

# Evaluating School-Based Vocational Programs and Transition Readiness Among High School Students With Disabilities in Texas

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## Abstract

Transition planning for students with disabilities is a critical component of secondary education, as many continue to face barriers social inclusion. This study evaluated the effectiveness of school-based vocational programs in enhancing transition readiness among high school students with disabilities in Texas. A quantitative descriptive design was employed using secondary data from the Texas Education Agency's State Performance Plan Indicator 14 (SPPI-14), Category B. Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests to identify variations in helpful high-school experiences across disability categories. Across disability types, helpful high-school experiences ranged from academic classes (67.1%) to paid work experiences (87.4%), indicating that students benefited more from experiential, hands-on learning opportunities than from classroom instruction alone.

**Keywords:** transition readiness; vocational education; students with disabilities; WIOA; post-school outcomes; SPPI-14; employment readiness

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## Introduction

The transition from high school to adulthood is a critical stage in the educational journey of students with disabilities. This period is intended to prepare students for meaningful roles, including employment, post-secondary education, and independent living. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires schools to provide transition services beginning no later than age 16, emphasizing coordinated activities that promote post-school success. Despite this mandate, research consistently shows that many students with disabilities face significant barriers when transitioning to the workforce, leading to disproportionately low employment rates compared to their non-disabled peers (Bechange et al., 2024; Hall, 2024; Goodall et al., 2022; Schutz et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2016; & Wagner et al., 2011).

Vocational skills programs in secondary schools were designed to address this challenge by equipping students with practical job-related competencies before graduation. These programs often include job shadowing, volunteering, internships, work-based learning experiences, and classroom-based career readiness training. Prior studies suggest that participation in such programs can increase students' employability, improve self-determination, and provide opportunities for social integration in community settings (Mazzotti et al., 2021 & Carter et al., 2010). However, despite these promising findings, outcomes remain inconsistent. Some students complete vocational training yet still struggle with workplace expectations, while others experience barriers such as limited access to community partnerships, inadequate support staff, or insufficient soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skill from family input (Wehman et al., 2018 & Test et al., 2009).

In Texas, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) and the collaboration between schools and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) provide additional layers of transition support through pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS). Yet, there is limited research on how well school-based vocational programs align with state vocational rehabilitation initiatives and whether this alignment improves measurable readiness outcomes (Akinola et al., 2025; Morningstar et al., 2017 & Benz et al., 1995). Without a clear understanding of the effectiveness of these programs, educators and policymakers risk misallocating resources and failing to prepare students adequately for competitive employment.

This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of vocational skills programs in enhancing the transition readiness of high school students with disabilities. Specifically, it examines the extent to which program participation improves job-related skills, identifies which components of vocational training are most impactful, and explores differences in outcomes across disability categories. By addressing these issues, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that can inform best practices in transition planning and strengthen collaborations between schools, families, and workforce development agencies (Zhang et al., 2023).

## Background

The transition from secondary school to adulthood is a particularly critical period for students with disabilities. Unlike their peers without disabilities, these students often encounter significant barriers to post school success, including higher unemployment rates, limited access to postsecondary education, and fewer opportunities for independent living (Newman et al., 2016 & Wagner et al., 2011). In the United States, federal laws mandates the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) both emphasize the importance of preparing students with disabilities for competitive employment. These legislative frameworks position vocational skills programs as central to the transition planning process, mandating school districts to implement evidence-based practices that bridge the gap between education and workforce transition.

The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) collaborates with school districts to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students with disabilities. These services include job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy development. Although this partnership represents a strong model of interagency collaboration, limited research exists on how effectively school-based vocational programs align with TWC support, or how such alignment impacts student readiness for postsecondary employment (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Given these realities, how can vocational skills programs in secondary schools contribute to students' transition readiness? Evaluating program outcomes will not only highlight effective practices but also reveal gaps that hinder successful transition. This research seeks to address these gaps by assessing the impact of vocational skills programs on the transition readiness of high school students with disabilities, with the goal of providing actionable recommendations for educators, families, and policymakers.

Without adequate preparation during their school years, these students risk entering adulthood with limited access to economic and social opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of dependency and inequality. Vocational and transition programs serve as vital platforms for equipping students with employability skills, self-advocacy, and independent living competencies. Evidence-based practices such as job shadowing, internships, community-based instruction, and workplace readiness training have been linked to improved outcomes in competitive integrated employment and postsecondary education participation (Carter et al., 2010; Test et al., 2009).

The emphasis on self-determination and self-advocacy shows that students who can identify their strengths, articulate their needs, and navigate support systems are more likely to succeed in adult roles. There is an active involvement of families, educators, and community partners that enhances transition outcomes, ensuring that students are not only equipped with skills but also connected to resources and networks that sustain long-term success (Mazzotti et al., 2021).

Ultimately, preparing students with disabilities for post-school life reflects both legal mandates and ethical imperatives. While federal laws underscore the responsibility of schools to support transition planning, the broader aim is equity and inclusion. Schools that prioritize transition readiness foster empowerment, close opportunity gaps, and promote meaningful participation in society for individuals with disabilities.

Vocational skills programs in schools are designed to prepare students with those with disabilities, for successful transitions from secondary education to the workforce or post-secondary education. These programs typically focus on developing both technical skills such as computer literacy, trade-specific competencies, and career exploration with soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, which are critical for workplace readiness (Morningstar et al., 2017).

In Texas, vocational preparation for students with disabilities is facilitated through coordinated efforts between schools and the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services. These programs offer career exploration, work-based learning experience, job coaching, and post-secondary training support. Through the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), the TWC partners with school districts provide students with disabilities opportunities in key areas: Job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on post-secondary education, workplace readiness training and instruction in self-advocacy.

Many Texas school districts have also embedded vocational training within their Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, ensuring that students with disabilities can access pathways in business, technology, healthcare, and trade skills alongside their peers (Magallanes, 2024, Perkins, 2024 & Priwer, 2024). Collaborative initiatives such as school-to-work transition partnerships, community-based vocational training, and supported employment programs provide real-world experiences that significantly enhance post-school outcomes (Grigal et al., 2019). Although a substantial body of research has examined the transition experiences of students with disabilities, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on national or generalized perspectives, with relatively limited attention to state-specific contexts. Given the unique role of the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) in delivering vocational rehabilitation and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), there is a need for research that investigates how these programs are implemented at the local level and how effectively they meet students' diverse needs.

Second, while numerous studies highlight the importance of vocational skills programs, fewer provide empirical evaluations of program outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly in terms of long-term employment. Many existing studies emphasize descriptive accounts of transition practices but do not assess the measurable impact of interventions on students' post-school success.

Third, research has often focused on specific disability categories, such as intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder, leaving gaps in understanding the experiences of students with a broader range of disabilities. Moreover, little is known about how factors such as race, socioeconomic status, language background, cultural and geographic location intersect with disability to influence transition outcomes.

Finally, while collaboration between schools, families, and community partners is frequently recommended, there is limited research exploring the quality and consistency of such collaborations, especially how schools, vocational rehabilitation services, and employers work together to provide meaningful, sustained opportunities for students with disabilities. Addressing these gaps is essential for improving both policy and practice. By situating the investigation within the Texas context, this study will contribute to filling these research voids and provide insights into how vocational skills programs can be optimized to better prepare students with disabilities for life after school.

## Problem Statement

Despite the growing emphasis on transition planning for students with disabilities, significant challenges remain in preparing these students for post-school life (TWC – CSNA, 2020). Although

federal laws such as the WIOA (2014) and IDEA (2004) require vocational preparation, many students with disabilities continue to experience poor postsecondary outcomes.

In Texas, the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) provides Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and vocational rehabilitation support in collaboration with schools. However, there is insufficient evidence on how effectively these programs are implemented and whether they adequately address the long-term needs of students with disabilities. Furthermore, little is known about how school-based vocational skills programs integrate with TWC's services, or how these partnerships impact the career readiness of students in diverse school settings.

The lack of empirical research on vocational skills programs in the Texas context particularly regarding outcomes for students with disabilities, creates a gap in knowledge that hinders the development of effective, evidence-based practices. Without this insight, schools, families, and policymakers may struggle to design programs that prepare students for successful transitions to employment.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how vocational skills programs in Texas support the transition readiness of students with disabilities as mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, the study seeks to explore the extent to which school-based vocational training aligns with transition planning requirements, and how these programs prepare students for successful postsecondary outcomes. This study also aims to identify strengths and limitations within existing vocational programs, highlighting gaps in implementation and accessibility that may hinder student readiness for post-school life. By focusing on the Texas context, the study will provide insights into how partnerships between schools, parents, and workforce development agencies, particularly the Texas Workforce Commission, can be leveraged to enhance transition services.

Ultimately, this research is intended to contribute to the broader field of special education by offering evidence-based recommendations to improve transition planning and vocational preparation for students with disabilities, ensuring they are equipped with the skills and opportunities necessary for long-term success.

## Research Questions

1. What trends are observed in the rates of competitive employment and post-secondary education among these students across the two fiscal years?
2. What implications do these outcomes hold for state transition planning and policy development?

## Significance

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on transition planning by focusing on vocational skills programs for students with disabilities within the Texas educational context. While federal and state mandates emphasize the importance of preparing students for post-secondary outcomes, limited research has examined how school-based vocational training aligns with the Texas Workforce Commission's Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and vocational rehabilitation. By addressing this gap, the study provides valuable insights into how schools and state agencies can work more effectively to improve student outcomes.

The findings of this study are significant for multiple stakeholders. For educators, the research highlights strategies that strengthen vocational programming and inform instructional practices that foster independence and career readiness. For policymakers and administrators, the study offers evidence to guide the development of stronger partnerships between schools and workforce agencies. For parents and families, the research underscores the importance of early exposure to vocational

skills and the potential of school-based programs to enhance long-term quality of life for their children.

More broadly, this study advances the field of special education by shedding light on systemic barriers and opportunities in preparing students with disabilities for meaningful participation in the workforce and society. The insights generated can inform not only the Texas context but also national and global discussions on inclusive vocational education and sustainable post-school transitions.

## Literature Review

The outcomes of the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA continue to show disappointing results in the desired transition plans. As a top priority for the federal and state governments, Etscheidt et al., (2023) identified that performance measuring indicators are not tightly fitted to the policy goals of transition outcomes capable of achieving any change because result-driven accountability may be incompatible with valid assessment of enhancing quality improvement due to ambiguities and problems associated with responsibility in IDEA. The US department of education (2019) states that 60 percent of the states are not aligned with the federal government IDEA (2004) mandates due to ineffective monitoring approach of the states and local education agency compliance. Most of the assessments from the states focused on graduation and dropout rates but never on improving transition or any definition to guide states and their agencies for transition procedures.

The tension between using indicator data as accountability mechanism and using data for school improvement may be eased by dissociating indicator data from external accountability demands and engaging with key stakeholders including schoolteachers, administrators, and students in selecting performance indicators. This misalignment opens the door to push for compliance with the continuous improvement monitoring process, yet most of the states could not meet the compliance requirement.

According to Mazzotti & Rowe (2015) the key to successful transition planning and instruction is transition assessment which determine appropriate services for students with disability. Transition identifies areas of student need where teachers can infuse transition-related instruction into school curriculum based on the cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds of school populations. Mazzotti & Rowe stated that culture can be used to support the learning of non-academic skills (self-awareness, resilience, self-efficacy, & goal-setting) is integral to student understanding of their abilities to persist in postsecondary environment.

Oloffsson (2025) identified the exposure to environment where pedagogy is subordinated to productivity and support structure are weak and unevenly distributed. The practice of separating school-based and workplace will work against the integration of transition, where expectations are clearly articulated. Moreso, the challenge of decentralization of work-based learning (WBL) makes learning conditions depend on local arrangement which results in uneven experiences. The challenge underscores the importance of harmonizing school curriculum on WBL (TWC – CSNA, 2020); thereby making collaboration of teachers with workplace supervisors possible to align goals and expectations. Although teachers function as intermediaries by juggling responsibilities, solving work-related conflicts, Oloffsson argued that the multitasking of teachers has the potential for deeper reflection on student development. While focus has been on equipping students with necessary vocational knowledge for workplace success, another aspect of transition is the socialization of workplace, which is the behavioral and cultural norm of the workplace e.g., punctuality, professionalism, and proactive communication.

In improving the transition services to transition-age students with disabilities; Lee et al., (2023) affirmed that composition of six federal agencies collaborated to form “promoting the readiness of minors in supplemental security income” (PROMISE). The collaboration helped students and families to navigate through the services and connect with the support needed for self-advocacy and self-determination which predicts postsecondary employment. The PROMISE included the social skill training for participants to develop the “*skills to pay the bills*” curriculum.

There are personal factors that influence postsecondary employment such as gender, race, disability, and household income these factors could be found to influence postsecondary employment prospects for students with disability (Wehman, et al, 2014). The study also examined other factors like the coursework, transition planning, extra-curriculum activities, academic performance, and community participation. Nominally, white students with disability exhibited a higher level of employment rates than other races, while students from families with higher incomes showed a higher propensity to get employed as well as those from a family with college degrees holders. Projects where students attend their own IEP are more likely to get employed (Honeycutt et al., 2015 & Wehman et al., 2014)

Despite federal legislation resulting in nationwide implementation of transition programs; unemployment rate among students living with disabilities continues to grow, indicating what it truly means to be disabled. Hence, it remains imperative for educators to continue researching and developing transition programs for transition students. To foster transition to employment, Moifenter et al., (2017) presented the Wisconsin: *Let's get to work* (WLGWTW) which adopted a multilevel approach of direct work experience with high school students to increase effective evidence-based transition practices and to identify policy needs, develop resources to influence the changes towards youth with disability by heightening policy awareness and practice that impact employment outcomes. To effectively engage students, the WLGWTW were planned to support the development of skills in social interaction, communication, self-determination, self-advocacy, employment planning that youth with disability will need to develop while still in school to prepare them for adult and independent life necessary for work.

Researchers have documented sufficient evidence on the barriers of students with disability, ranging from discrimination, inaccessible environment, lack of accommodation among other challenges. Cameau et al., (2025) documents how literacy, unmet accommodations, and weak transition planning increase the risk of unemployment/underemployment for students living with disabilities. Cameau et al. cited poor transportation service as a barrier to reaching places of work, negative attitudes from employers and colleagues. Refilure further recorded barriers became complex with speech problems complicating communication in the workplace.

The disparity in employment rates between disabled and non-disabled individuals serves as a measure of disparity due to social stigma challenge in rehabilitation. Qiu et al., (2023) affirms that health related deprivations, particularly body impairments, are resented by most employers. This reason is responsible for the low level of disability of society in general. Levitt et al., (2024) investigation on visually impaired people found that the employment barriers reported by participants included inability to develop employability skills or acquiring educational knowledge affected the transition prospects of students with disability. In most cases, limited expectations and stereotypes were major impediments to finding and keeping a job.

Hirano et al., (2024) states that two key federal legislations: IDEA and WIOA were fundamental to students' transition to workplace. The laws required schools to develop transition plans aimed at facilitating students' transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment. It also requires states to develop services and programs designed to help young people with barriers to employment. The both laws stipulate that students with disabilities are eligible for additional services while in high school, called pre-employment transition services, to help prepare them to attain education or skills training and secure employment with opportunities for advancement.

Given the positive impact of employment on a person's quality of life and social inclusion, there is still a widening gap of individuals with disability getting a job compared with individuals with no disability despite effort to provide access to quality job readiness training. Davis et al., (2021) described the model of project SEARCH as competitive integrated employment outcomes for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and developmental disability. The hallmark of project SEARCH is to immerse students with disabilities into the workplace using application and interview processes.

Further, developing self-determination skills Burke et al., (2018) defined it as service to freely chosen goals and self-determined actions taken to establish choice making and self-management. However, it is essential that skills associated with self-determination are integrated into curriculum instruction in the school context. According to Burke et al., the integration to develop a goal setting mentality among the students while in formal schooling supports students when they seek paid employment. The interagency collaboration coordinated transition planning, early and continuous paid work experiences, and family expectations are among the strongest predictors of postschool success. Systematic reviews synthesize these as repeatable, evidence-backed program components.

This review is summarized by the Texas Workforce Investment Council (2016), which found that people with disabilities represented only 6 percent of the people employed in the state of Texas. The low rate of employment among individuals living with disability affirms that there are other barriers to successful employment outcomes. One of the major contributors to the barriers is the lack of collaboration with community stakeholders, employers and business owners through agency collaboration. The collaboration among teachers, schools, vocational rehabilitation and transition coordinators through early planning, student-led and focused individual employment plans (IEPs) meeting with parents' involvement that facilitates the overarching goals of meeting the long-term goal of the individual in job seeking, sharing expertise, and coordinating service delivery. Although interagency collaboration that exists outside of the school can create employment exploration opportunities. Taylor et al., (2016) reiterated the essence of collaboration with vocational rehabilitation services to deal with low employment rates for postsecondary students living with disabilities. Taylor highlights that collaboration appears inconsistent and limited, while information about students' IEPs were not disseminated among the stakeholders in the transition groups, thereby relationships within the different disciplines, philosophical orientations and skill sets can be unsettling and challenging.

In summary, researchers has documented persistent gaps in postschool employment and education for students with disabilities (Newman et al., 2016; Wehman et al., 2014), also promising in-school practices such as work-based learning, self-determination training, and active IEP participation (Burke et al., 2018, Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015 & Carter et al., 2010) and the policy expectation that collaboration across education, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce systems will result in effective outcomes (Lee et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2016; Texas Workforce Investment Council, 2016).

## Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), which explains how individuals experience, interpret, and adapt to major life changes. The theory is particularly useful in understanding the process of transitioning from high school to postschool employment for students living with disabilities. Schlossberg's model highlights four interacting components: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies that influence how individuals cope with and navigate transitions:

- **Situation:** refers to the context and circumstances of the transition, such as the completion of high school and the movement toward competitive or supported employment. It considers timing, control, and readiness for this change.
- **Self:** represents the personal characteristics of the student, including disability type, motivation, self-advocacy, resilience, and confidence, which affect how they perceive and respond to transition challenges.
- **Support:** encompasses the resources available to the student, such as family involvement, school staff, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and community programs that provide guidance and encouragement.
- **Strategies** involve the coping mechanisms and practical steps used by students to manage the transition, including participation in career and technical education, paid or volunteer work experiences, ARD/IEP meetings, and job-readiness training.

Collectively, these four dimensions shape the transition readiness and postsecondary employment outcomes of students with disabilities. The framework emphasizes that successful transitions occur when students receive individualized support, build self-determination skills, and actively engage in strategies that align with their goals and abilities.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive analysis utilizing secondary data to investigate the transition experiences of students living with disabilities as they move from school into postsecondary employment. The quantitative descriptive design was adopted to examine post-school outcome of students with disabilities in Texas. This approach allows the researchers to summarize the patterns and relationships in the existing data.

The data was obtained from Texas Education Agency (TEA) State Performance Plan Indicator (SPPI) – 14 category B: Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Indicator 14 Reports, which track postsecondary engagement outcomes (employment, postsecondary education, & training) one year after exit.

### Data Collection Procedures

This study employed a secondary data analysis approach, utilizing publicly available data obtained from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) under the State Performance Plan Indicator 14 (SPPI-14B) Post-School Outcomes Survey Reports for Federal Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023. The SPPI-14B dataset was chosen because it provides comprehensive information on the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities, focusing on competitive or contributory employment and independent living as key indicators of transition readiness and vocational success.

### Data Source and Access

The SPPI-14 data are compiled annually by the Texas Education Agency in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, Section 618. (20 U.S.C. § 1418), which mandates annual state submissions on the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities. The data reflect follow-up surveys conducted one year after students with disabilities exit high school. These surveys capture students' engagement in competitive employment, post-secondary education, or other training activities. The 2022 and 2023 datasets were downloaded from TEA's website and reviewed for completeness and consistency. No identifiable personal information was included, ensuring adherence to privacy and ethical standards for secondary data use.

### Data Analysis and research questions

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize students' perceptions of high school experiences in preparing for employment for research question 1.

To determine whether significant differences existed between 2022 and 2023, an independent-samples t-test was performed comparing "helpful participation" percentages across eight experience types for research question 2. The purpose of the data was to further determine the extent to which relationships exist between vocational training and employment among graduating students.

**RQ1.** What trends are observed in the rates of competitive employment and post-secondary education among these students across the two fiscal years?

**RQ2.** What implications do these outcomes hold for state transition planning and policy development?

### Ethical Considerations

The data were collected and reported by a state agency under federal guidelines, and no personal identifiable information was accessed, therefore, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required. Nevertheless, the researchers adhered to ethical standards for data handling, ensuring transparency, confidentiality, and integrity throughout the analysis process.

### Key Findings

**RQ1.** The Purpose of this question is to determine whether there are significant differences or trends in the percentages of students engaged in competitive employment in 2022 and 2023.

A descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to determine the trend using frequencies to show whether the percentages are increasing or decreasing during the years investigated (See Appendix A). According to Texas Education Agency (2024); Post-school outcomes survey: State performance plan indicator 14 Final Report for 2022 and 2023.

Students with disability in competitive employment after 1 year Graduating from High School.	
2022	2023
<b>TEA SPPI Reports</b> Total Respondents = 9,340 14A Higher Ed = 28% 14B Higher Ed + Competitive Employment = 59% Competitive Employment = 59% - 28% = 31% Calculation: $9340 \times 0.31 = 2,895$	<b>TEA SPPI Reports</b> Total Respondents = 10,591 14A Higher Ed = 28% 14B Higher Ed + Competitive Employment = 56% Competitive employment = 56% - 28% = 28% Calculation: $10,591 \times 0.28 = 2,965$

*Texas SPPI-14 Post-School Outcomes for Students With Disabilities (Cohorts 2022–2023).*

Male students continued to represent most respondents (approximately 65%), while females comprised about 35%, showing a marginal year-to-year difference of less than one percentage point. Hispanic students remained the largest racial group, accounting for roughly half of all respondents with an increase from 49.8% in 2022 to a marginal increase of 50.3% in 2023, then followed by White students with the same 24.5% in both 2022 and 2023. Black or African American students from 19.1% 2022 to a marginal decline to 19.0% in 2023. Smaller groups, including Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian students, represented about 6.0% of respondents. In terms of disability classification, learning disabilities remained the most common but showed a gradual decline from 45.3% in 2022 to 44.5% in 2023, whereas the proportion of students identified with autism increased slightly from 12.3% to 12.5%, while categories such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and other low-incidence disabilities (e.g., auditory, traumatic brain injury or visual impairments) remained relatively stable with slight variations. Overall, the demographic composition of respondents across both years reflected minor fluctuations but substantial stability, suggesting consistency in the characteristics of students participating in post school outcome reporting across Texas.

**RQ2.** The purpose of this question is to translate empirical findings into actionable insights for educators, administrators and leaders in planning and policymaking. What do patterns suggest about population and their needs, what implications would emerging subpopulation signals mean to future policy development? What gap and strengths exists in the current dispensation, are there need for innovation, equity, resource allocation or program shift? Further, the question creates the opportunity for Texas Education Agency, TWC-vocational rehabilitation and secondary education sector to re-engineer their structure for efficiency such as early transition, interagency collaboration, enhanced data system for a more efficient competitive employment.

Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare perceived helpfulness of high-school experiences between the 2022 and 2023 cohorts of students with disabilities.

Results indicated no statistically significant year-to-year differences across experiences (all  $p > .05$ ). The largest mean difference occurred for *Academic Classes* (M diff =  $-7.00$ ,  $p = .10$ ), suggesting a small, non-significant decline in perceived helpfulness from 2022 to 2023. Overall, the findings indicate relative stability in students' perceptions of high-school experiences that supported post-school employment outcomes.

### Statistical Summary of Findings

Across all disability categories, the mean perceived helpfulness of high-school experiences ranged from 67.1% (academic classes) to 87.4% (paid work experience), indicating a consistent preference for experiential rather than instructional supports. When averaged across all experiences, the overall helpfulness level was approximately 78%, suggesting that most students perceived at least moderate value in their school-based transition activities. A rank ordering of mean helpfulness placed paid work experience ( $M = 87.4$ ) and work-based learning ( $M = 84.8$ ) at the top, followed by volunteer work ( $M = 82.1$ ) and career and technical education (CTE) classes ( $M = 74.8$ ). The lowest mean ratings were observed for participation in ARD meetings ( $M = 68.1$ ) and academic classes ( $M = 67.1$ ), indicating limited perceived contribution to postschool employment readiness. These numerical patterns corroborate the visual trend observed in experiential, community-embedded learning environments offered the greatest practical support for students with disabilities preparing to enter the workforce.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the imperative to embed paid and work-based learning opportunities into every student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition plan; strengthen interagency collaboration among schools, employers, and vocational rehabilitation providers to facilitate early job exposure.

Further, it suggests alignment of CTE curricula with labor-market competencies to ensure equitable access for students with all types of disability; and re-envision ARD/IEP meetings as participatory, student-centered platforms that integrate career assessment and goal-setting rather than focusing solely on procedural compliance (*See Appendix B*)

#### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited by the narrow time frame of the dataset, which includes only two reporting years (2022 and 2023) from the Texas SPPI-14 Post-School Outcomes Survey. While these data offer timely insights into recent transition patterns, the two-year window is too short to capture meaningful long-term trends in post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Transition readiness, vocational development, and employment outcomes typically require multi-year observation to reflect changes in program quality, district-level implementation, and broader economic conditions.

Because the analysis focuses on only two cohorts, it is not possible to determine whether differences between 2022 and 2023 reflect actual improvements or declines in transition readiness, or whether they are the result of random variation, policy changes, or inconsistencies in data collection. The restricted timeframe also limits the capacity to explore longitudinal transitions, such as how students' progress from high school into long-term employment. Many key transition-related outcomes unfold over several years, and the absence of extended data reduces the depth of interpretation.

Moreso, the reliance on statewide, secondary survey data prevents the study from examining the district-level, program-level that may influence year-to-year differences. Without multiple years of historical data, it becomes challenging to assess whether specific vocational interventions, CTE pathways, or collaborations with the Texas Workforce Commission contribute to sustained post-school success. Despite these limitations, the two-year dataset still provides a valuable snapshot of immediate post-school outcomes for students with disabilities in Texas and highlights areas in which transition programs can be strengthened. Future studies using multi-year trend data would allow for a more robust examination of transition trajectories and ensure a clearer understanding of long-term readiness across diverse populations.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The transition of students with disabilities to adulthood is a period of uncertainties. Educational institutions have been searching for solutions that can promote post-school success. Vocational skills have been identified as a critical component that can address this challenge through additional layers of employment transition services that assist educators in the preparation of students to transit into competitive employment. The success of these transition services and the legislative frameworks depends on various factors (educators, community involvement and family buy-in), while few

students benefit from educational and legislative provisions, others still face numerous challenges due to their disability or orientations.

Furthermore, students who could identify their strengths, articulate their needs and master their support system are more likely to overcome the difficulties of transitioning to employment. But ability to overcome challenges has a direct consequence of overcoming the gaps and how they meet students' diverse needs, such as socioeconomic status, language barrier and geographical location. In other words, transition success has insufficient evidence towards how effective programs are to be implemented to ensure post-school employment. This lack of evidence revolves around aligning vocational skills with Texas Workforce Commission's services. The results of this study indicate a relatively stable pattern in post-school outcomes across years for students with disabilities in Texas. However, the ongoing gaps in competitive employment and postsecondary participation highlight the need for stronger alignment among educators, administrators of the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), and families. The following actionable recommendations are offered to enhance transition planning and policy implementation.

In recommendation, educators play a pivotal role in building students' transition readiness and self-determination. To improve outcomes, educators should integrate transition-focused planning which allows students to acquire employability, self-advocacy, and social skills essential for workforce integration. Educators should increase opportunities for students to participate in structured work-based learning experiences, career-technical education (CTE) classes, and internships aligned with their career interests and abilities before they exit high school.

Educators should use data to identify which experiences contribute most strongly to employment and tailor interventions accordingly by enhancing instruction in soft skills, e.g., communication, time management, teamwork, and problem-solving into daily instruction to prepare students for real-world employment expectations.

Administrators in collaboration with Texas Workforce Commission is instrumental in ensuring that transition services align with labor market needs and that interagency collaboration is seamless which helps to strengthen School-TWC collaboration by developing formal communication systems between transition coordinators and TWC vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors to ensure consistent service delivery before and after graduation. Further, administrators should conduct joint mock interviews and career fairs, organize collaborative consultations involving both educators and TWC staff to simulate authentic hiring scenarios and improve students' readiness and build stronger relationships with local employers to create inclusive job placements and mentorship opportunities that support competitive employment outcomes.

Conclusively, families are essential partners in supporting successful transitions. Their engagement reinforces the skills and expectations learned at school and promote early career awareness, encourage exploration of personal interests, and volunteer experiences. Families must collaborate actively in IEP Meetings and advocate for transition goals that reflect the student's strengths and ensure inclusion of work-based learning experiences within the IEP and reach out to Texas Workforce Commission to seek community support, by collaborating with TWC counselors and community agencies post-graduation to ensure employment stability and access to support services.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Year 2021-22/2022-23 Demographic Characteristics**

YEAR	2022	Respondent (%)	Difference	2023	Respondent (%)	Difference
Female	34.6%	36.0%	- 1.5pp	35.7%	34.8%	< 1.0pp
Male	65.4%	64.0%	+1.5pp	64.3%	65.2%	< 1.0pp
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.3%	0.3%	< 1.0pp	0.3%	0.4%	< 1.0pp
Asian	1.5%	2.5%	+ 1.0pp	1.5%	2.2%	< 1.0pp
Black/African American	19.1%	19.0%	< 1.0pp	19.0%	18.3%	< 1.0pp
Hispanic	49.8%	43.5%	- 6.3pp	50.3%	45.8%	- 4.4pp
Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian	0.2%	0.1%	<1.0pp	0.1%	0.1%	--
White	24.5%	29.7%	+ 5.3pp	24.5%	28.3%	+ 3.8pp
Two or More Races	4.6%	4.8%	< 1.0pp	4.3%	4.9%	< 1.0pp
Auditory Impairment	1.4%	1.6%	< 1.0pp	1.2%	1.2%	--
Autism	12.3%	17.7%	+ 5.4pp	12.5%	17.2%	+4.7pp
Deaf-Blind	0.1%	0.1%	<1.0pp	0.1%	0.1%	--
Emotional Disturbance	9.6%	9.1%	< 1.0pp	9.9%	9.1%	< 1.0pp
Intellectual Disability	12.6%	12.2%	< 1.0pp	12.8%	12.6%	< 1.0pp
Learning Disability	45.3%	38.5%	- 6.7pp	44.5%	39.4%	- 5.1pp
Orthopedic Impairment	0.6%	0.7%	< 1.0pp	0.6%	0.7%	< 1.0pp
Other Health Impairment	16.3%	17.8%	+ 1.5pp	16.6%	17.7%	1.0pp
Speech Impairment	0.9%	1.0%	< 1.0pp	0.9%	0.9%	--
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.4%	0.4%	--	0.3%	0.2%	< 1.0pp
Visual Impairment	0.7%	0.8%	< 1.0pp	0.6%	0.8%	< 1.0pp

PP – per person.

## Appendix B

### High School Experiences in Preparing for Employment after High School

Question to Students	Did not participate		Participation not Helpful		Participation helpful	
	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
Specific individual(s) at the school	37%	42%	11%	11%	52%	47%

Experiences participating in ARD meetings	24%	33%	23%	22%	52%	45%
Academic Classes	29%	35%	23%	21%	48%	44%
Extracurricular activities	56%	57%	11%	12%	33%	31%
CTE classes	60%	62%	11%	11%	30%	27%
Volunteer work	69%	67%	5%	6%	26%	27%
Paid Work Experience	72%	72%	4%	4%	25%	24%
Work-based learning	76%	73%	5%	7%	19%	21%
Something else	86%	87%	3%	4%	10%	9%

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