Summary

Public policy towards youth with disabilities has changed significantly over the past twenty years. Changes in the 1970s and 1980s focused on integrating students with disabilities into regular classrooms and developing an Individual Education Program (IEP) to assist the youth through high school. These changes did provide a foundation for policy in the 1990s and coming into the new millennium that focus on providing formal systems of services and transition planning for all youth with disabilities.

However, the authors note that while the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the special education law that provides the mandate for services, at the same time, there are many other programs and policies which directly impact on the education, health, welfare, and well being of young people with disabilities in the families. In their paper, they characterize the programs that may effect the transition from school to work for youth with disabilities other than IDEA. Given the emphasis on accountability for outcomes in the recent IDEA legislation, they note that it is increasingly important for both researchers and policy makers to understand the interaction of school and high school programs on the economic decisions of youth with disabilities. They correctly observe that there are relatively limited existing resources to examine these program overlaps.

For example, they identify several critical non-school programs in which there is ample data to study and which have direct bearing on the economic outcome of young people as they grow into adulthood. They indicate that Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, and the Children with Special Health Care Needs Program are all highly pertinent programs that directly impact upon the ability of students to learn and function in school environments. Furthermore, they delve into impairment specific supports such as the Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities System and Mental Health System, as well as the State Workforce Development Systems which comes under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998.

One of the best contributions of this paper is to characterize transitions of youth with disabilities through a flow chart mechanism, where accounts for the interaction of school and non-school programs. The addition of non-school programs is an important component of the transition process. The authors correctly note that while the IEP should provide some guidance, because of the lack of a centralized system of support in the non-school system, there are several types of pathways youth can follow during their post-school transition. For example, some may continue to access the same supports they had in school, while others may lose these supports and/or need to access these supports for the first time during the post school transition. The transition hence can be particularly complex for those with specific limitations who do not automatically quality for support. A good example of this would be those with learning disabilities which make up a very large population. The authors call for expanded amounts of data to be collected in the non-school area which can be merged with school data. They suggest that two types of data initiatives would significantly enhance information on the transition process. The first initiative would be to improve the information on special education collected in major surveys such as the Survey of Income and Program Participation. A second type of data initiative would develop administrative databases that could be linked to other databases which track transition by youth with disabilities.
In sum, the authors propose government agencies consider various options to improve in this overall area by adding information on special education participation of major survey efforts; develop existing administrative databases that include information on program that serve youth with disabilities; and, finally, to use qualitative methods to examine how the strategies in adult based programs interact with those by youth while they are in school. This is an outstanding paper that takes a different look at some of the transition issues that are faced by schools and communities in America as they struggle to help young people with disabilities enter adulthood.

Reference