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Study: Children With Disabilities In New Hampshire Face A Challenging Future

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Although New Hampshire ranks among the best in the nation in its inclusion rates of children with disabilities in regular classrooms, children with disabilities in the state are not likely to receive all the tools they need to succeed as independent adults, according to a new policy brief issued by the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire. The report, "Educational Supports for Children with Disabilities," is the first of a four-part series titled "Access New Hampshire: Living with Disability in the Granite State." Among the major findings:

- Awareness and overall scope of understanding about disability is changing and is reflected in new trends among the children served by educational agencies. Among the 14 types of disability tracked by the New Hampshire Department of Education, three areas showed substantial enrollment increases over the past five years: autism (130%), developmental delay (108%), and other health impairments (28%).
- Timeliness of services is critical for all youth at an early age, particularly so for children with a disability, yet only one in two children receiving Part C services (services for children ages birth to three with or at risk for developmental delay) have their transition plans in place at least 90 days prior to their third birthdays. In addition, the report found that about one in four children with a specific learning disability were not identified and had not received services until the age of 12 or older.
- Children with disabilities are not learning many of the basic skills needed to function independently in New Hampshire. More than one in three children with a disability in the third grade scored in the "Substantially Below Proficient" category in both the reading and math portions of the New England Common Assessment Program. In comparison, less than one in ten children without a disability scored in the lowest category.
- There are some major gaps in knowledge about the effectiveness of educational supports for children with disabilities and what happens to them in the long run. For example, given that the high school drop out rate is two times higher among youth with disabilities than those without, educators and policymakers need a better understanding

of the major factors driving this disparity as well as what prospects and resources these individuals have access to as adults.

“A good education is the cornerstone for living a successful and independent life in New Hampshire, with far-reaching implications for better employment, access to appropriate health care, and civic participation,” says Peter Antal, a social policy researcher with the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire and author of the policy brief. “For children and youth with disabilities, the need for effective educational supports is absolutely critical to ensure that all individuals can live independently – able to hold employment that provides a regular wage, able to access community resources, and, most importantly, able to be recognized as an integral and contributing member of the community rather than as an individual who only needs the community’s support.”

In their continuing efforts to improve upon existing services, react to an increasingly complex environment of accountability and strive for excellence in the area of developmental supports and special education, both the New Hampshire Division of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education have made substantial headway. Antal notes that New Hampshire is ranked third best in the country in the number of students with a disability who are included in a regular education classroom a majority of the time.

“A growing body of research has demonstrated that students with disabilities who are engaged in this manner have better attendance rates, develop better communication, social, and literary skills, have fewer disciplinary referrals, and better performance on standardized measures of reading and math,” says Antal. “Benefits are not limited to children with disabilities, either; in a study of preschool aged children, researchers have shown other positive impacts among their parents as well as classmates without disabilities.”

However, the data reviewed in the brief also identify a number of disparities and issues of concern among the educational supports available to New Hampshire’s children. “New Hampshire data document the fact that disparities can start early on in an individual’s educational career and continue through high school. This fact, combined with gaps in knowledge about the needs of the children served, a high school drop-out rate that is twice as high for students with disabilities as their peers, and employment prospects that are directly tied to the quality of educational supports one receives indicate that, without substantial change, many of today’s youth will enter adulthood without some of the basic tools they need to function as independent adults and contributing members of their community,” he adds.

The Access New Hampshire project is a joint research effort by representatives of the Institute on Disability, Disabilities Rights Center, Granite State Independent Living, New Hampshire Developmental Disabilities Council, the New Hampshire Department of Education, the New Hampshire Division of Behavioral Health, the New Hampshire Bureau of Developmental Services, and the Governor’s Commission on Disability. The project analyzes published reports as well as agency administrative data to help legislators, state and local agencies, and the broader public to understand the extent to which New Hampshire enables all its residents – particularly those living with some form of a disability – to live and participate in their communities. By highlighting key issues – education, health care, employment, and community supports – Access New Hampshire aims not only to raise awareness about the barriers confronting individuals with disabilities, but also to initiate a statewide conversation about how to work together to address these challenges. Copies of the Access New Hampshire policy briefs are available on the Institute on Disability website at www.iod.unh.edu.

The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire was established in 1987 to provide a coherent university-based focus for the improvement of knowledge, policies, and practices related to the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. Its mission is to advance policies and systems changes, promising practices, education, and research that strengthen communities to ensure full access, equal opportunities, and participation for all persons.

Editors and reporters: For a copy of the policy brief, call 603-862-4320 or visit the Institute on Disability's website at www.iod.unh.edu to download the pdf file.

For perspectives and current projects underway among Part C (B-3) or Part B/619 services (ages 3-21), contact Matthew Ertas, Director, Bureau of Developmental Services (603-271-5122 / mertas@dhhs.state.nh.us) or Santina Thibedeau, State Director of Special Education (603-271-6693 / sthibedeau@ed.state.nh.us).

For additional perspectives:

Dick Cohen, Executive Director, Disabilities Rights Center (www.drcnh.org). Mission: The Disabilities Rights Center is dedicated to eliminating barriers existing in New Hampshire to the full and equal enjoyment of civil and other legal rights by people with disabilities. 603-228-0432 / richardc@drcnh.org.

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Ellen Shemitz, President, Children's Alliance of NH (www.childrennh.org). Mission: We believe New Hampshire can be one of the best places anywhere for a child to grow up, a place where every child is valued, and no child is left behind. Our purpose is to be a catalyst for making that vision a reality. 603-225-2264 / eshemitz@childrennh.org.

Mary Trinkley, Director, CAUSE (Communities Actively United for Social Equality) (<http://www.nhcause.org/>). Mission: increase opportunities of choice through public education, community organizing and community action for individuals with disabilities and others in New Hampshire who feel they experience a diminished quality of life due to social injustice. 603-491-2513 / nhcause@aol.com.