

What Matters Most: Research on Elevating Parent Expectations

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Erik W. Carter

As I read the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), my short paraphrase of the central purpose of special education is that our primary charge is to equip young people with disabilities to flourish after high school. This is at the very heart of why we send students to school for up to 21 or 22 years.

So let me begin with a provocative statement: **The most powerful force** in changing transition outcomes for young people with significant disabilities is not ultimately found in the transition plans we craft, the educational services we offer, the instruction we provide, or the systems we build, but rather in the expectations and aspirations individual parents hold for their sons and daughters. All of these other efforts are no doubt essential, but absent families equipped with a clear and compelling vision for a “good life” after high school, we are missing something utterly essential.

Put simply, efforts to change the post-school landscape must include a heavy investment in equipping families to hold high expectations from an early age, to aspire toward and advocate for enviable outcomes after high school, and to share this vision with every person whose life intersects with the lives of their sons and daughters.

Such a statement should not be at all surprising to this audience. Parents have long assumed the roles of allies and advocates—for their own children and for others traveling a similar road. It is not an overstatement to say that our field—and this organization called TASH—exists because of parents who held a different set of expectations for their sons and daughters that fundamentally challenged prevailing views of what was possible.

Which brings me to my role on this panel. My charge is to emphasize the very strong empirical support for making an investment in elevating parent expectations. And to affirm that what we intuitively know to be so important actually does make a noticeable difference in the lives of young people.

Research on Parent Expectations

In a recent study (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012), my colleagues and I analyzed data from a nationally representative, longitudinal study involving more than 11,000 youth in all 13 special education categories. Our interest was in pinpointing which student, family, school, and community factors predicted the early post-school employment outcomes of young adults with significant disabilities. And so we focused our attention on the subset of students with intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities who were eligible for the alternate assessment and/or who had lower ratings on a set of

questions related to functional skills. We carefully considered a number of factors during high school that might influence whether or not students were working for pay in the community during the first two years after high school. And what we learned surprised us.

We found that young adults with significant disabilities whose parents definitely expected them to obtain post-school work way back in high school were more than five times as likely to have paid, community employment within two years after exiting. When other factors were combined into our model, parent expectations still increased the odds of post-school employment more than three-fold. The unexpected finding was that these expectations

were a stronger predictor than anything else we examined—student demographics; the social, communication, and independence skills youth possessed; even access to school programs and transition experiences. Do you want to more than triple the odds that students will find a place to share their gifts and talents in the workplace? Focus on the expectations parents hold long before graduation day.

Other studies echo these findings with other groups of students with disabilities and other transition outcome areas. For example, Bonnie Doren and her colleagues (2013) found that parent expectations predicted not only work, but also graduation rates and postsecondary education enrollment for students with high-incidence disabilities.

So what are the aspirations parents hold as they relate to their child's life after high school? In Tennessee, we are in the midst of a five-year systems change project (Carter & McMillan, 2014). And we considered it critical early on to understand what these parental expectations are, to learn what shapes them, and to invest heavily in elevating them.

Over the past 10 months, we have been carrying out a statewide study that has thus far involved more than 2,300 parents living in almost every county in our state. Parents with sons and daughters of all ages served under the special education categories of intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. Here is what they are telling us.

More than 80% of parents of school-age children with disabilities say they consider it somewhat or very important for their son or daughter to work for real pay, part- or full-time, in the community. Yet only about two thirds (64%) actually expect this to happen. These numbers are almost double those of parents who consider sheltered employment to be an important and likely outcome. The short take-away: More and more parents are aiming for integrated, community employment. A similar portrait emerged in the area of postsecondary education. And so we likewise have to aim our services and supports—both formal and informal—at these inclusive post-school experiences.

What Do We Know?

Before mentioning a few possible points of influence, let me share some reflections on important aspects of these expectations.

1. Expectations are formed early and over time.

Waiting until high school to begin casting and supporting a vision of post-school college and careers simply means waiting too late. Early messages—including those heard at first diagnosis and throughout elementary school—can often be “course shifting.”

2. Expectations shape experiences.

The expectations parents hold influence the types of early exposure and experiences provided to children with significant disabilities. With particular post-school goals in mind, parents may be more likely to require household responsibilities, have conversations about future careers, involve their child in extracurricular and community activities, advocate for rigorous learning opportunities at school, and connect their child to early volunteer and work experiences. All of this takes place long before transition planning emerges at age 14 or 16.

3. Experiences also shape expectations. The influence is bidirectional.

Involving students in general education courses, hands-on work experiences, and other inclusive activities may help parents (along with others in the community) catch a first glimpse of what might be possible when their child is provided the right opportunities, supports, and encouragement. Particularly when they have seen few other examples of other young people with disabilities involved in these ways.

4. Expectations are influenced by opportunities and supports.

Expectations tend to dip as families approach the “post-school precipice” and all that can be seen is waiting lists, segregated services, and eligibility requirements. And so these transition years do become all the more critical to work to align services and supports to high expectations, rather than letting expectations re-align to prevailing services and supports. We must make sure we get the direction of the pull right.



Where Should We Go?

With limited time, let me conclude with four modest suggestions for where we might invest in this area of our work.

1. We must connect families with ordinary examples of what is possible.

Too often, our parents have seen few examples of young people with significant disabilities working, going to college, or contributing in other ways within their community. Whether by linking parents to families who are a little further along in this journey or showing “success stories” of how others have made it happen, new portraits of possibilities get formed. In our state, for example, we are creating print and video-based “success stories” that illustrate how other Tennessee families are navigating these issues. All can be found at www.tennesseeworks.org. Parents need avenues through which to hear from other parents.

2. We must invest in expectations.

It strikes me as unethical to encourage parents to catch a vision and pursue it with vigor only to withhold the very services and supports needed to make it happen. An overarching theme of this town hall is that we need a much greater investment in transition if we have any chance of changing the post-school landscape. I absolutely agree.

3. We must catch and communicate a collective vision.

Parent aspirations are powerful, but so are the expectations of educators, employers, service providers, members of faith-based organizations, community leaders, and youth themselves. Indeed, every child with a significant disability in every state should hear the message from multiple sources—that they have something of value to contribute within the workplace and something essential they bring to their community.

4. Finally, we must let parent expectations challenge ours.

There is a tension here we must release. Professionals are sometimes reluctant to encourage parents to “hope large” because it ultimately will require us to do things differently, demand us to invest differently. We must be willing to let families show us what is possible when their vision exceeds our own. Indeed this is how the field has always moved forward fastest.

Thank you for investing your time in this town hall. And for your work on behalf of young people with significant disabilities and their families.

References

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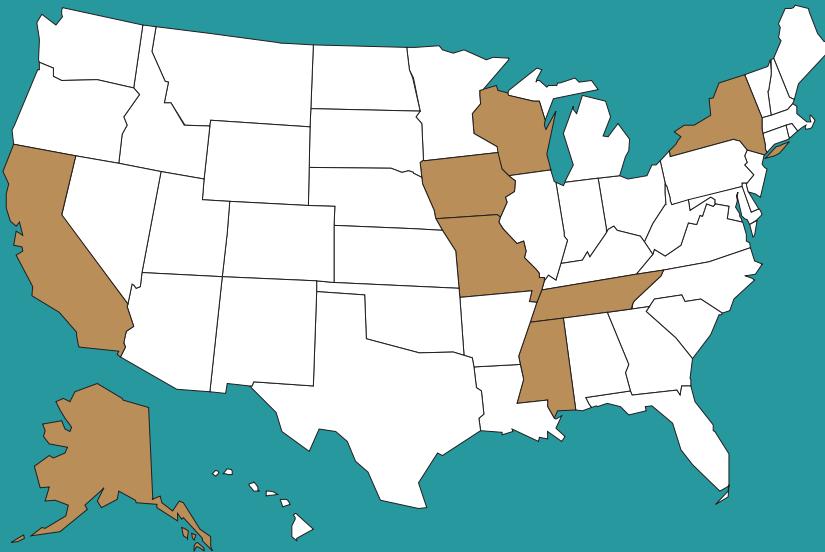
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About the Author

Erik Carter, PhD, FAIDD, is a Professor in the Department of Special Education at Vanderbilt University and a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Investigator. His research and teaching focuses on evidence-based strategies for supporting access to the general curriculum and promoting valued roles in school, work, and community settings for children and adults with intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. He is the Principal Investigator of the Tennessee Works Partnerships in Employment Systems Change Project.



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For more information about Partnerships in Employment please contact:

John Buttwerworth, PhD
Principal Investigator, Partnerships in Employment Systems Change Technical Assistance Center
Institute for Community Inclusion
john.buttworth@umb.edu; 703-542-6799

Karen Flippo, MRA
Project Manager, Partnerships in Employment Systems Change Technical Assistance Center
Institute for Community Inclusion
karen.flippo@umb.edu; 617-287-4344

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