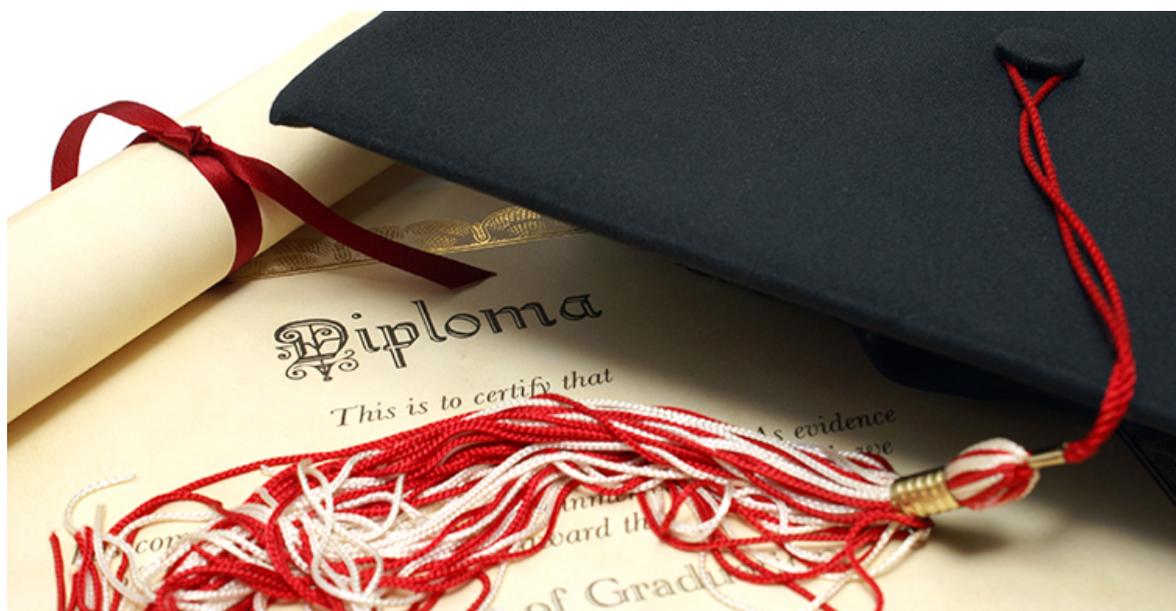


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Phillips & Pillow: 4 Things States Should Do to Help Students With Disabilities Graduate Ready for the World of Work



July 17, 2019

By **KARLA PHILLIPS AND TRAVIS PILLOW**

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Recent headlines have said it loud and proud: Unemployment is at a 50-year low, and it might drop a lot further.

This is good news, for sure. But while more and more jobs are created, we can't shake the fact that not everyone is benefiting from this boom.

Unsurprisingly, the Brookings Institution has found that the out-of-work population is “disproportionately disadvantaged, with lower levels of education, limited English proficiency, higher levels of disability and limited work experience.”

With unemployment at a historic low, is now the time to focus on those who have been historically underemployed? For the sake of Karla's daughter, we hope so. She has a disability, and in 2017 only 37 percent of adults with a disability in the U.S. were employed.

As our economy climbs closer to full employment, this is the perfect opportunity to make sure employers are able to take advantage of the talents individuals with disabilities have to offer. The responsibility to develop those talents lies with our education system.

It is well established that having a high school diploma is critical for future employment opportunities. Yet for the 2016-17 school year, the graduation rate for

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students with disabilities was only 67 percent nationally while the national graduation rate for all students increased to 84.6 percent, a record high. The gap is far too wide.

For a growing percentage of jobs, a high school diploma is no longer enough. More students are going to need some form of education or training beyond high school — including graduates with disabilities.



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While graduation rates are well known and highly publicized, few are aware that states have been collecting post-school outcomes for students with disabilities for years. The

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good news is that rich, longitudinal and comparable state data can be incorporated into state accountability and reporting systems to target state improvement efforts.

The bad news is that the data clearly demonstrate that much work needs to be done. For example, in Karla's home state of Arizona, 1 in 4 students with disabilities is not engaged in higher education or meaningful employment. For those with intellectual disabilities, the rate is twice as high. As our thriving job market makes it harder for employers to fill vacancies, these numbers should serve as a call to action.

What should states do?

Create an annual "State of the State" report in special education. Share it publicly. Present it to the state board of education. The report should be anchored by the ambitious but attainable goals in the state's federal Every Student Succeeds Act plan. The data, which states already collect, must play a meaningful role in their broader strategies and not simply be monitored by the U.S. Department of Education as a compliance exercise.

Monitor progress with a special education dashboard. This is a systemwide challenge that demands the efforts of K-12 schools,

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colleges and career training providers. State boards of education have the power to convene these institutions and focus them on shared goals.

Pay attention to the data they already have.

Federal law already requires states to track long-term outcomes for students with disabilities. The question is whether these reports sit on an obscure website or actually drive systemwide change. Use this [map](#) to find your state's federal State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report.

Disaggregate all data by disability. There are large variances in long-term student outcomes by disability category, and this should result in different approaches and strategies. Similarly, some disability groups are limited in representation by school and even by district, but statewide data should be annually reported and statewide strategies discussed to help local educators develop cost-effective strategies to prepare students with disabilities for successful adult lives.

An estimated 85 percent to 90 percent of students with disabilities can meet the same graduation standards as all other students if they receive the right services and supports. To make this a reality, states need a laser-like focus on the ultimate goal for all our

students with disabilities and a willingness to admit that we are not doing enough to ensure all students are truly prepared to thrive as adults.

Karla Phillips is policy director for personalized learning at ExcelinEd. Travis Pillow is a senior fellow at the Center on Reinventing Public Education and former editor of redefinED, a website chronicling the new definition of public education in Florida and elsewhere.



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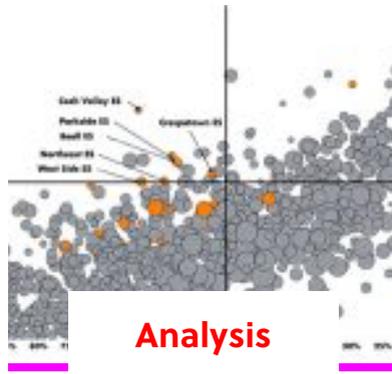
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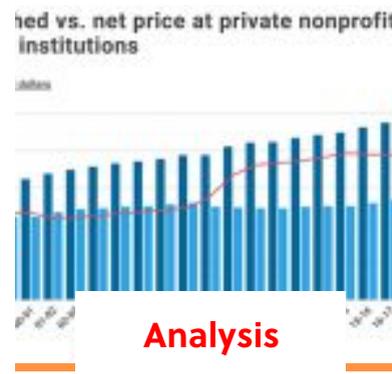
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