

# Succeeding in High School and Beyond: Insights and Action for Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities

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*This summary is based on research led by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) in partnership with WestEd. NCLD is an organizing partner of the GRAD Partnership.*

## INTRODUCTION

Graduating from high school has significant lifelong benefits, including higher earning potential, lower unemployment rates, and improved overall well-being. However, students with learning disabilities (LD) face systemic challenges that result in lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates compared to their peers without disabilities.

This brief, *Succeeding in High School and Beyond* is a 'call to action.' It urges educators, policymakers, and members of the community to reduce barriers to educational engagement and success for students with LD by strengthening student engagement and agency, improving access to effective supports, and creating welcoming environments where students with disabilities can succeed. Addressing these areas is essential for increasing high school completion rates and improving long-term outcomes not just for LD students, but also for students without disabilities who experience challenges in the high school environment.

We present findings from our High School Completion Study, which examined the lived experiences of 107 young adults (ages 18–24) with LD who either left high school before graduating or considered leaving but ultimately earned their high school diploma. The research was led by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) with support from the GRAD Partnership and in collaboration with WestEd. The primary aim of the research was to identify barriers and protective factors that influence high school completion for students with LD. The survey addressed topics such as school climate and safety, risk factors and supports associated with high school incompleteness, mental health, experiences with disability and special education, social supports, and adverse childhood experiences. Findings from the survey were expanded upon in one-on-one interviews with 27 survey participants. **Though centered on the needs of students with LD, this study's findings and recommendations ultimately improve the educational experience and support successful transitions into adulthood for all students.**

The decision to leave high school is often a complex process influenced by multiple factors. Research highlights that behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement play a crucial role in preventing students from leaving before graduating by fostering a sense of connection, purpose, and belonging in school.

## WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

A learning disability (LD), also known as a specific learning disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), is a brain-based disorder that affects an individual's ability to read, write, or perform mathematical tasks. Common types include dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. During the 2022-23 school year, 15% of all public school students received special education services under IDEA. Of those, 32% qualified due to a specific learning disability.

*Source: National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2024*

When asked about how their disability played a role, 65% of survey respondents felt their learning disability contributed “a lot” or “all” to their decision to leave or consider leaving high school before graduating.

Findings highlight the importance of fostering student agency, creating welcoming and supportive school environments, addressing behavioral engagement and risk factors, and ensuring access to effective high school completion supports. The study reveals that school engagement — behavioral, emotional, and cognitive — acts as both a risk factor and a protective factor in high school completion for students with LD. When LD students have agency and feel connected, valued, and supported, they are more likely to persist through challenges in school and graduate.

This brief is organized around four critical areas of school engagement and success: **Behavioral engagement; student agency; belonging and connectedness; and access, use, and efficacy of high school completion and transition supports.** For each area, we summarize findings, contextualize their importance, and offer recommendations. It is our hope that the recommendations will be used as roadmaps for action to ensure all students, including those with LD, have access to the supports they need to thrive in high school and beyond.

## BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT

### Why Does Behavioral Engagement Matter?

Behavioral engagement refers to outward signs that indicate how physically and cognitively present students are in both academic and non-academic activities at school. It includes participation and effort, attendance, attention and focus, homework and classwork completion, involvement in extra-curricular activities, following rules and behavioral expectations, and the absence of disruptive behaviors. High levels of behavioral engagement are associated with better academic outcomes, stronger social connections, and lower dropout rates. Previous research has found that students with LD are 8% more likely to be chronically absent than those without disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Tardiness and absenteeism often result in missed opportunities for classroom engagement and learning. This can lead to poor academic performance and potential for additional behavioral challenges when in school, leading to increased likelihood of not graduating high school.

## Key Findings on Behavioral Engagement

### Attendance and Participation

In their last year of schooling, nearly one-third of surveyed young adults reported being late at least once a week or more; one-quarter were absent once a week or more. Even more dramatically, half reported skipping at least half of all their classes, three-quarters turned in assignments late or not at all, and nearly all (89%) reported struggling to pay attention in class.

### Absenteeism and Tardiness

- 55% missed school for 10+ days in a single school year, with some of the most common reasons for this being reported as feeling anxious or depressed (60%), illness (53%), being behind in schoolwork or not prepared for a test or assignment (34%), being teased or bullied at school (27%), not getting enough sleep (25%), and feeling bored (22%).
- 31% were late for school once a week or more in their final year.
- 26% were absent once a week or more in their final year.

### Classwork and Participation

- 50% reported skipping some or all classes.
- 89% struggled with paying attention in class.
- 76% reported turning in assignments late or not at all.

### Behavioral Expectations and Consequences

- 22% had interactions with law enforcement, with 11% experiencing charges, arrests, or more long-term consequences due to these interactions.
- 6% reported being suspended or expelled for reasons such as physical aggression, repeated violations of school rules, and persistent disruptive behaviors.

### Out-of-School Challenges

For almost one-third of those surveyed, school challenges were compounded by unmet life needs.

- 34% struggled to get where they needed to go due to lack of transportation access.
- 38% faced food insecurity, experiencing hunger due to lack of food at home.
- 13% reported homelessness at some point in their lives.

### What Does This Mean?

The survey findings reveal a complex picture of behavioral engagement in school, highlighting risk indicators such as attendance, struggles with schoolwork, and behavioral

concerns. They suggest that for most young adults who thought about or did drop out of high school, it was a daily struggle to navigate and succeed in school. Overall, school disengagement was most evident in class participation and homework, attendance, tardiness, and skipping class. Many respondents struggled daily in their classes, and furthermore made efforts to avoid the stress and challenges of those classes and/or the peer or teacher interactions which occurred in them. The findings indicate that **targeted policy and practice changes are needed to support LD students better. It is noteworthy that these changes would likely also benefit all students regardless of disability status, as attendance, schoolwork, support, and engagement difficulties may be experienced by students both with and without disabilities.**

The data also highlight that, like many students who have unmet physical or emotional needs due to poverty or other environmental factors, a troubling share of LD students face out-of-school challenges such as unreliable transportation, food insecurity, and unstable housing — all of which can impact graduating from high school. Thus, in addition to disability supports, we cannot overlook addressing the needs of students who experience various adverse environmental factors that hinder regular attendance and the ability to focus in class and complete schoolwork.

## Recommendations

Schools can foster increased behavioral engagement to improve student outcomes and reduce dropout rates for learners with LD with several key strategies:

- 1. Encourage student voice:** Involve students in focus groups to identify areas of need and support. Seek to understand the reasons behind skipped classes, struggles to pay attention, and incomplete assignments — and explore what strategies or resources could help address these challenges. Include students in school decisions and academic planning to promote ownership of their education and engagement with the school community.
- 2. Early intervention for attendance, engagement, and academic issues:** Develop [student success systems](#) which closely monitor attendance, engagement, and academic performance on a weekly basis and enable schools to rapidly and strategically respond to student needs as soon as they arise. When students see no response to their struggles they assume nobody is noticing and nobody cares, leading to counter-productive avoidance responses.
- 3. Expand access to mental health support:** Address high rates of anxiety, depression, and stress by increasing the

availability of school-based counseling, social workers, and peer support groups.

- 4. Strengthen behavior support systems:** Implement restorative practices and develop clear behavioral expectations collectively with students, teachers and administrators, and engage families in behavior interventions.
- 5. Increase well-being response:** Don't assume that all LD students' struggles in school stem from LD. Build relationships between LD students and trusted adults to enable identification of out-of-school barriers to school success and strategies to mitigate them.

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## STUDENT AGENCY

### Why Does Student Agency Matter?

Students are more motivated to learn when they are able to take on an active role in their learning,<sup>2</sup> and exercise both choice and voice. Schools can support student engagement by fostering student agency — the ability of students to take active and self-determined roles in their learning by setting goals, making choices, reflecting, creating change, and taking responsibility for learning. Agency develops through opportunities for autonomy, self-determination, and self-advocacy. For students with disabilities, including those with LD, self-determination is key, enabling them to make intentional choices and work toward valued goals. Research links higher self-determination to academic achievement, engagement, and positive adult outcomes such as employment and community participation.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, self-determined students are more likely to persist through challenges, leverage their strengths, and take ownership of their learning.

### Key Findings on Agency

The majority of respondents who dropped out or thought about dropping out reported that they did not have enough agency to change the circumstances of their high schooling. Less than 50% reported they could change their classes or schedule when they were struggling. Less than 40% reported they knew how to ask for help when needed, and barely a third felt their teachers supported their self-advocacy.

### High School Autonomy and Choice

- A little more than half (59%) were able to take the classes they wanted.
- Just less than half (49%) could change their classes or schedule when they were struggling.
- About half (53%) were encouraged by their high school to play an active role in tracking their academic progress.

## High School Self-Advocacy

- Only 38% knew how to ask for help when needed.
- Only 39% felt their teachers were responsive to their learning needs.
- Just 35% felt their teachers helped them advocate for themselves.

Participation in the legally-mandated IEP or 504 process is one of the main opportunities for high school students with LD to have agency over their high school learning experiences. While three-quarters report attending these meetings, only half had some choice in their IEP and 504 goals. Several wanted greater involvement in the decision-making process.

**When discussing the importance of learning self-advocacy skills around one's disability and the role those skills play in education, one participant explained, "If I was able to explain in my own words exactly what disability I had, how I felt, what it was, and why it made it so hard to come to school and occasionally stay quiet, I feel like I would have gotten in a lot less trouble." Another participant similarly shared, "You can't advocate without knowing the language that you need to express your needs."**

## Voice and Participation in the IEP or 504 Process

- 74% attended IEP or 504 meetings, 60% of them understood the process.
- 50% had some choice in their IEP or 504 goals.
- 46% wanted to be more involved in their IEP and 504 plan decisions.

Another area of critical need for high school students with LD is support with choosing, planning for, and transitioning to life after graduation. Students who drop out — or think about it — may believe their future options, such as low-skilled local jobs, won't change whether they graduate or not. This "almost always mistaken" belief often stems from a lack of postsecondary guidance or support with identifying a clear pathway to future success. It's especially concerning that the strong majority of young adults who were surveyed said that they didn't feel well-prepared or supported for their postsecondary transitions.

## Post-High School Preparation, Advocacy, and Support

- Only 38% reported receiving adequate preparation for their future path after high school.

- Only 38% met with adults at their school to set goals for what they wanted to do after high school and make a plan for how to achieve them. Of these respondents, a third (34%) wanted more say in their transition plans.
- Less than half (46%) said that their school informed them about requesting college accommodations, and only 33% were informed about workplace accommodations.
- Less than half (40%) felt prepared to advocate for themselves after high school.

## What Does This Mean?

The findings show that the majority of respondents felt they had little agency in changing the circumstances of their high schooling, highlighting a need for more student-driven decision-making. Most said they could not change a course they were struggling with or adjust a schedule that did not work for them. Many reported that they believed their teachers would not respond favorably to self-advocacy and were not sure how to access extra help. These findings help explain their behavioral responses. Moreover, many reported a lack of agency in the formal IEP or 504 processes for students with disabilities — a space designed for them to be able to positively alter their circumstances or gain effective supports. They also reported having limited self-determination in what happens after high school.

If students' current circumstances of their schooling and learning are not working well, and students moreover feel that they have little or no agency to change those circumstances, they will naturally tend to skip class, be late, struggle to focus, or not complete assignments.

The agency findings thus help explain the higher dropout rates among students with disabilities. When LD students feel stuck in classes where they struggle, when formal support systems like IEPs or 504 plans don't help them make meaningful changes, and when no one shows them how high school connects to adult success, then the pull of dropping out increases.

## Recommendations

The link between lack of agency and dropping out also points to a potential solution. Increasing student agency — giving LD students more control over their high school experience, aligning it with their strengths rather than challenges, and connecting those strengths to viable pathways to adult success — could improve behavioral engagement. Greater agency in their learning could lead to better attendance, improved focus in class, completing assignments, and stronger motivation to overcome the everyday obstacles LD students can face.

By employing the following strategies, schools can create environments where students with LD feel empowered, engaged, and prepared for future success:

- 1. Expand student autonomy and choice:** Increase flexibility in class selection, scheduling, and goal setting to support self-determination and continue to offer more meaningful opportunities for engagement and accomplishment in extra-curricular activities to enhance the high school experience for students with LD.
- 2. Strengthen postsecondary readiness:** Improve instruction on self-advocacy, accommodations, and transition planning to prepare students for life beyond high school. Provide work-based or other experiential learning opportunities to help students connect the work they do in school to future success.
- 3. Provide students access to adult advocates:** LD students need an adult in school who they believe knows and cares about them as a person, who they can go to when they get stuck either academically or in navigating the daily challenges of school.
- 4. Enhance self-advocacy supports:** Provide targeted teacher training so that teachers feel equipped to teach students how to ask for what they need, and to encourage self-advocacy skills among students.
- 5. Improve IEP and transition engagement:** Ensure students play an active and informed role in shaping their educational and career pathways.
- 6. Foster disability identity and awareness:** Implement programs that promote self-acceptance and connect students with a broader community of peers and mentors to help reduce isolation. These connections can inspire students to pursue their goals with confidence and pride.

## BELONGING AND CONNECTEDNESS

### Why Does Belonging and Connectedness Matter?

When students feel cared for, accepted, respected, included, and supported, they are likely to experience numerous positive outcomes, including lower levels of substance use, improved mental health, reduced violence, improved school attendance, higher academic achievement, increased graduation rates, and greater postsecondary success.

Schools play a crucial role in fostering student engagement by supporting students' sense of belonging and connectedness to peers and teachers.

## Key Findings on Belonging and Connectedness

While most respondents reported having a supportive adult in their lives during high school — someone who provided moderate to high levels of support — large numbers did not feel supported by their teachers or peers. Only 44% believed their teachers cared about their presence in class and only 33% said their teachers helped them when they were upset. Even more distressing, many young adults reported hostility from a teacher or peer: two in five reported that some, most, or all of their teachers bullied or mistreated them. Similar numbers reported being disliked by other students. In terms of the larger school community, nearly a third reported feeling unnoticed when absent and only a little more than a third felt that they were a part of the school community.

When discussing factors that allowed them to persist in high school and graduate, one participant shared, “A teacher of mine motivated me to stay and complete my high school.” Another said, “The main reason I stayed and completed high school [was due to] the support from a few close friends who believed in me and helped me push through.”

### Level of Connectedness with Teachers and School

- Less than half felt most, or all their teachers made them feel supported (40%), valued and listened to student ideas (41%), cared about their presence in class (44%), and helped them when upset (33%).
- 44% reported that some, most, or all their teachers bullied or mistreated them.
- Nearly a third (32%) felt unnoticed when absent and only 36% felt part of their school community.
- When interviewed about having a supportive adult in their life during high school, participants generally reported moderate to high levels of support.

### Level of Connectedness with Peers and Friends

- Just over half (55%) had a strong friend support system and could always find a friend to eat lunch with (58%).
- 42% felt disliked by other students.
- Less than half (42%) trusted their high school peers.

## What Does This Mean?

LD students who drop out or consider doing so may often lack a sense of belonging and connectedness during high school. Many LD students navigate indifferent and even hostile encounters with teachers and students at the same time as struggling to focus and complete classwork. Feelings of limited agency to change their circumstances compound these challenges. These results provide additional context for the behavioral engagement findings.

The results on belonging and connectedness are a major warning sign for drop out risk. It is unlikely that high school graduation rates for students with LD will improve dramatically when they feel like high school is hostile terrain. There is much opportunity to improve the high school experience and graduation rates for students with LD, which ultimately benefits all students. Schools can — and must — take action to ensure that no student feels bullied and disliked by teachers and peers, or unnoticed when they're absent.

Fostering a stronger sense of belonging and school connectedness is well within a school's control. It doesn't require a large infusion of resources and has been linked to improved attendance, course performance, behavior and graduation rates, and even students' mental and physical health.

## Recommendations

### 1. Create welcoming academic and social environments:

Develop school-wide initiatives supporting social-emotional learning, mental health, and programs that are designed to make students feel seen, valued, and heard in their learning environments.

**2. Build school connectedness:** Students are connected to school when they have a supportive adult, supportive peer group, engage in pro-social activities, and feel welcome in school for who they are. The goal is to increase the number of all students, and LD students in particular, who have all four elements. Establish current baselines for each component, identify areas for improvement and monitor growth. Continue until noticeable improvement is seen across all four components. For more insights on the impact of school connectedness and evidence-based strategies for centering connectedness, see this [research brief](#) where four GRAD Partnership members explore evidence on strategies to build a sense of school connectedness and engagement among all students.

**3. Improve teacher training and interventions:** Provide training to foster positive student interactions and emotional support with students in the classroom. Implement interventions that support the social skills of all students,

not just those with disabilities, to help equip students with the skills they need to engage in positive relationships with each other.

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## ACCESS, USE, AND EFFICACY OF HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION AND TRANSITION SUPPORTS

### Why Do High School Completion and Transition Supports Matter?

Participants were asked a series of questions related to their access, use, and perceived usefulness of programs in high school designed to support learning, high school completion, and transition to postsecondary education and workforce settings. Participants responded to survey questions about programs and supports such as academic, college, and career counseling, career and technical education, TRIO program (e.g., AVID, Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services), and on-the-job training and apprenticeships.

### Key Findings on Access, Use, and Efficacy of High School Completion and Transition Supports

Despite the availability of several high school programs and supports, **participation was limited**, and respondents had **mixed views on their usefulness**. These gaps point to **critical disconnects** between student needs and how schools implement support programs.

- Despite access to high school programs, participation was low across the board — few programs reached even 50% participation rates, while some saw rates as low as 7%.
- In most cases, less than half found that the programs and supports they engaged in were useful (e.g., only 40% found college counseling to be useful).
- Many misunderstood the role of school counselors, expecting more emotional/mental health support.
- Even in programs like AP (Advanced Placement) or Dual Enrollment, participants reported inconsistent accommodations and inadequate teacher support.

### What Does This Mean?

The majority of those surveyed reported that existing student supports in their high school were insufficient or that they did not have enough information about their availability or purpose. This strongly suggests that more of the same is unlikely to be sufficient. The findings for behavioral engagement, student agency, and belonging and connectedness should be used to help improve and expand both the provision of student support in high schools and students' understanding of and access to these supports.

It is important to note that improvements to these programs will inevitably help the entire student population and not just students with LD.

## Recommendations

To better support students with LD in completing high school and successfully transitioning to postsecondary pathways, the following policy and practice changes are recommended:

- 1. Support a good transition to high school:** Closely monitor LD students' engagement and academic participation during the early months of high school. Address issues with proactivity rather than reactivity. Create a supportive transition environment in which students feel confident in their ability to thrive and see high school as a meaningful passage to a successful future.
- 2. Encourage student voice:** Engage students directly through listening sessions or focus groups. Include students in program design to improve relevance and increase buy-in.
- 3. Flexible scheduling:** Encourage LD students to participate in constructing schedules tailored to their strengths and with supports to overcome their challenges; this could be a combination of face-to-face, blended and virtual offerings.
- 4. Comprehensive counseling programs:** Ensure school counselors are equipped to provide individualized academic, college, and career guidance, particularly in alignment with students' IEP. Train counselors in how to support accommodations in college and workplace settings.
- 5. Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement:** Expand Dual Enrollment and AP/IB course offerings. Provide LD students support in navigating the course structures and demands of these offerings.
- 6. Soft skills training:** Incorporate instruction in soft skills like time management, communication, and self-advocacy.
- 7. Expand Career and Technical Education and work-based learning opportunities:** Grow Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in partnership with local industries. Provide internships, apprenticeships, and job-shadowing opportunities. Establish CTE-to-career pathways that lead to certifications, degrees, or employment opportunities.
- 8. Teacher training:** Provide training to general and special education teachers on:
  - Disability bias and stigma
  - Strengths-based approaches
  - Legal responsibilities around accommodations and IEPs

**9. Prepare for the workplace:** Host job-readiness workshops that focus on topics such as resume-writing and development, job interview etiquette and prep, and workplace formalities. Partner with employers for mock interviews, mentorship, and paid work experience.

**10. Parent and community engagement:** Involve families and community partners in planning student support programs.

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## CONCLUSION

Supporting high school completion for students with LD requires a comprehensive approach that fosters student agency, strengthens belonging and connectedness, promotes behavioral engagement, and ensures access to effective support systems. Research shows that students who feel empowered, supported,<sup>4</sup> and engaged<sup>5,6</sup> are more likely to persist through challenges and graduate.

However, systemic barriers continue to limit opportunities for students with LD, leading to lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates compared to their peers without disabilities. NCLD's survey and interview findings for young adults with LD who dropped out of high school or considered it clearly show how these barriers resulted in immense, and in many cases, life-altering challenges during their high school experience. They report struggling to engage in their classes and complete their schoolwork. They felt limited in their ability to change their courses or learning environment. They experienced a lack of support from teachers and classmates, and far too often felt bullied and disliked by them. Existing student supports in general, and formal special education processes such as IEPs and 504s, were often poorly understood by students — and even when they were understood, they were often insufficient to meet their needs.

At the same time, these study findings indicate a path toward improvement. By creating welcoming environments, increasing school connectedness, providing meaningful opportunities for self-determination, strengthening the connection between high school courses and viable pathways to adult success, and addressing risk factors that contribute to disengagement, schools can significantly improve outcomes for all students.

It's important for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to consider strategies that promote school engagement, student agency, supportive relationships, and broaden access to essential resources. By working together to ensure that all students have the learning opportunities, experiences, tools, and support they need to thrive in high school, we can help set the stage for stronger academic, career and life outcomes.

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NCLD is a member of the [GRAD Partnership](#). The GRAD Partnership brings together twelve organizations to partner with schools, districts, states, and local community organizations to create the conditions needed to bring the use of evidence-based student success systems from a new practice to a common practice.

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