THE STATE OF
Learning Disabilities

A SNAPSHOT

Navigating the Transition **to Adulthood**

V3: Published 12.10.2024

NCLD

Table of contents

Introduction

Transitioning to adulthood is a pivotal time for all young adults, bringing opportunities and challenges. These experiences are even more pronounced for those living with a learning disability (LD). The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), in collaboration with WestEd, conducted a national survey of young adults with LD. This study provides essential insight into the factors that matter most during this developmental phase and offers actionable recommendations for educators, employers, and policymakers.

To better understand the transition to adulthood for young adults with LD, we collected survey data from 1,283 young adults ages 18-24. The sample was weighted by gender, race/ethnicity, and geographic region to approximate national representation.[1]

Survey questions addressed factors related to...

Graduating from high school

Enrolling in postsecondary education

Entering the workforce

Reporting positive well-being

While many pathways to success exist for thriving in adulthood, this analysis focuses on high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and workforce entry — areas where young adults with LD have been historically underrepresented compared to their peers without LD.[2,3,4]

About one-third of the school-age population who received disability services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in K-12 during the 2022-2023 academic year received services for a specific learning disability (or LD) as their primary disability.

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability (LD), also known as a specific learning disability, is a brain-based disorder affecting an individual's academic ability. These disabilities affect individuals differently but most often affect reading, writing, and mathematical skills (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia).

1 For more information about the survey sample and how weighting was used to approximate a nationally representative sample, refer to the *Young Adult Survey: Technical Report.*

2 Sanford, C., Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., Knokey, A.-M., and Shaver, D. (2011). The PostHigh School Outcomes of Young Adults With Disabilities up to 6 Years After High School. Key Findings From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSER 2011-3004). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

3 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Economics Daily*, Employment–population ratio for people with a disability increases to series high in 2023 at **https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2024/employment-population-ratio-for-people-with-a-disability-increases-to-series-high-in-2023.htm** (*visited September 16, 2024*).

4 National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Students With Disabilities. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved [date], from **https://nces.edu.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg**.

Students with LD can achieve at the same level as their non-disabled peers in school if given appropriate instruction and support,[5,6,7,8,9] which is emphasized in research and is evident in practice. However, students with LD often do not receive the support they deserve. This lack of support creates barriers to success both during and after high school, which can hurt students' development of literacy and numeracy skills. Low literacy and numeracy increase the likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system,[10] experiencing negative socioemotional impacts,[11,12] facing unemployment or underemployment,[13] and other challenging outcomes. Unmet needs may hinder young adults' ability to thrive as they transition to adulthood.

LD represents the largest population of students with disabilities served under IDEA in K-12.[14] Yet we know little about the post-high school outcomes for young adults with LD, including their postsecondary and workforce experiences. Ensuring young adults with LD have the support to thrive in school, postsecondary education, and the workforce is critical to establishing an equitable, inclusive, innovative, and productive society.

"I had to consciously work harder to reach the same level of success as my peers…Once I had begun working alongside my brain, I not only found myself succeeding but excelling."*

Key Finding

Feelings of belonging are important for success among young adults with LD. They thrive in supportive environments that promote a sense of inclusion and acceptance.

5   Berkeley, S., Scruggs, T. E., & Mastropieri, M. A. (2010). Reading comprehension instruction for students with learning disabilities, 1995–2006: A meta-analysis. Remedial and Special Education, 31(6), 423–436.

6   Dennis, M. S., Sharp, E., Chovanes, J., Thomas, A., Burns, R. M., Custer, B. and Park, J. (2016), A meta-analysis of empirical research on teaching students with mathematics learning difficulties. Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 31, 156-168.

7   Fuchs, L. S., Malone, A. S., Schumacher, R. F., Namkung, J., Wang, A. (2017) Fraction intervention for students with mathematics difficulties: Lessons learned from five randomized controlled trials. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 50(6), 631-639.

8   Gersten, R., Chard, D., Jayanthi, M., Baker, S., Morphy, P., & Flojo, J. (2008). Mathematics instruction for students with learning disabilities or difficulty learning mathematics: A synthesis of the intervention research. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

9   Gillespie, A. & Graham, S. (2014). A meta-analysis of writing interventions for students with learning disabilities. Exceptional Children, 80(4), 454-473.

10   Mallett, C. A., Quinn, L., Yun, J., Fukushima-Tedor, M. (2022). The "learning disabilities-to-prison" pipeline: Evidence from the Add Health National Longitudinal Study. Crime & Delinquency, 1–35. **https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287221081024**

11   Nelson, J. M., & Harwood, H. (2011). Learning Disabilities And Anxiety: A Meta-Analysis. Journal Of Learning Disabilities, 44(1), 3–17. **https://Doi.org/10.1177/0022219409359939**

12   Maag, J. W., & Reid, R. (2006). Depression Among Students With Learning Disabilities: Assessing The Risk. Journal Of Learning Disabilities, 39(1), 3–10. **https://Doi.org/10.1177/00222194060390010201**

13   Office of Disability Employment Policy. (2023). Disability Employment Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. **https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/research-evaluation/statistics**

14   The disability category included under IDEA is Specific Learning Disability or SLD. In this report, we use the term Learning Disability or LD synonymously.

*All quotes in this document were directly sourced from the survey results.

NCLD

Survey Respondent Overview

Getting to know young adults:

50% attended traditional public schools

32% attended private high school *(including private schools for students with disabilities)*

8% attended public charter schools

45% are currently enrolled in postsecondary education

19% held a Bachelor's degree

17% held vocational or technical licenses

9% held an Associate's degree

60% male

42% White

32% Hispanic or Latino

19% Black or African American

"It's vital to recognize the diversity among young adults with learning disabilities: achievements, challenges faced, and the varying strategies employed to navigate daily tasks and long-term goals. Understanding and supporting these unique aspects can significantly enhance their experiences and successes."

Of those formally identified with LD:

34% reading disability

25% math disability

29% writing disability

26% had LD in multiple areas *(e.g., reading and math)*

"Learning disabilities do not imply lack of intelligence; they simply mean having difficulties in specific areas of learning."

Co-occurring diagnoses may make young adults' experiences more complex:

18% ADHD

14% mental health disability

9% Autism

9% speech or language impairment

"It's essential to recognize the emotional impact of living with a learning disability. There have been moments of frustration, self-doubt, and even anxiety..."

What We Learned

Findings from the survey analyses showed that experiences of inclusion and acceptance in these transformative years are essential for building a thriving life. When schools, postsecondary institutions, and workplaces cultivate a sense of belonging and acceptance for young adults with LD, they feel comfortable advocating for what they need. Inclusive environments promote academic, social, emotional, and economic success among people with diverse learning, social, and physical needs.

We outline key findings below. For a full description of analyses and results, see the *Young Adult Survey: Technical Report.*

FIGURE 1

Factors* Explored for Supporting High School Graduation, Postsecondary Enrollment, and Employment

1 in **5** (**20%**) felt unsure if their family understood how their disability impacted them growing up, or felt misunderstood by their family

Family support
captures family understanding and support related to LD

Half (**50%**) reported being bullied by a peer because of their LD

Social inclusion
captures interactions and relationships (e.g., bullying) between young adults with LD and their peers, educators, and school

Nearly **1** in **4** (**24%**) felt unsure if their teachers wanted them in class or believed they were not wanted

Educator acceptance
captures the quality of interactions between young adults and educators at their high school

Over **1** in **4** (**28%**) felt unsure if their school had appropriate mental health resources or believed these resources were lacking

School connectedness
captures experiences of high school belonging and access to supportive resources

→ Significant relationship

····· No significant relationship

High School Graduation

Postsecondary Enrollment

Employment

Results

High School Graduation

Higher social inclusion (i.e., lower rates of peer and adult bullying) significantly predict high school graduation above and beyond family support and high school experiences of educator acceptance and school connectedness and support.

Postsecondary Enrollment

Higher educator acceptance significantly predicts postsecondary enrollment above and beyond family support and high school experiences of social inclusion and school connectedness and support.

Employment

Young adults with LD had varying levels of family support and varying high school experiences of educator acceptance, social inclusion, and school connectedness but none of these factors alone significantly predicted their participation in the job market.

Note: *These statistics reflect young adults' current perceptions of their experiences in high school. They reflect the aggregate percentage of young adults who responded either affirmatively ("strongly agree" plus "agree") or not affirmatively ("uncertain", "disagree" and "strongly disagree") in our sample based on their response to a 5-point Likert scale.*

* Each factor listed above included an aggregate of at least three survey items associated with the theme. The image approximates the structural equation model. For more detailed information regarding analyses, see the *Young Adult Survey: Technical Report*.

Factors Supporting High School Graduation

Feeling socially included by peers and educators (i.e., feeling a sense of belonging in school) is critical for high school graduation.

What these data tell us
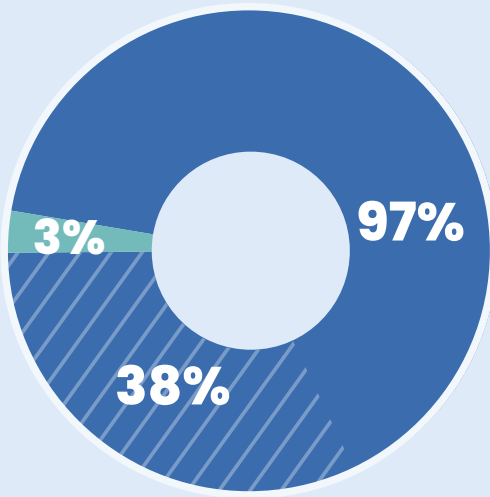
- **97%** graduated high school, but
- **38%** considered leaving high school before graduating
- **3%** left high school before graduating

97%

38%

3%

**Social inclusion in high school is important** beyond family support, educator acceptance, and school connectedness *(see Figure 1)*. Young adults who left high school before graduating reported being bullied by their peers and other adults at higher rates than those who graduated *(see Figure 2)*.

"My family and peers have been my backbone; they gave me a platform to navigate the world on my own terms, and through that, I have learned to embrace my unique abilities."

FIGURE 2

Bullying by High School Graduation Status
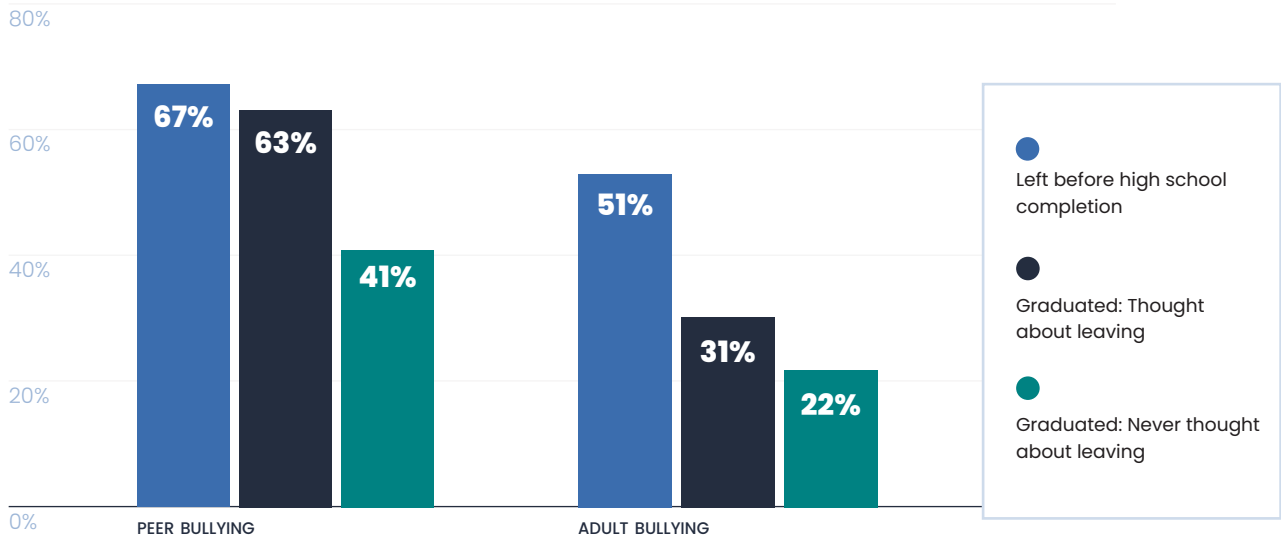
- Left before high school completion
- Graduated: Thought about leaving
- Graduated: Never thought about leaving

Note: *This chart shows the aggregate percentage of young adults who "strongly agree" and "agree" that they experienced adult or peer bullying in high school for the entire sample, as well as disaggregated by whether they completed high school, finished high school but thought about leaving, or left without graduating. Differences were not tested for statistical significance; this chart shows practical importance. Individuals who left high school before completing their studies represent 3% of the total sample (lower than the national average for individuals with LD). This chart illustrates data collected from questions under the "social inclusion" factor.*

How can we improve high school graduation rates among young adults with LD?

Findings suggest creating environments and relationships that cultivate a sense of social inclusion and belonging is essential for helping students with LD persist to high school graduation. Educators and school leaders can help to create such environments within and beyond the classroom, including in clubs and extracurricular activities. Preparing educators to improve their practice for students with LD is critical, but first and foremost, shifting their mindsets and reducing stigma related to disabilities is essential.

Findings suggest the need to:

"Living with learning disabilities has taught me resilience and creativity in problem-solving. It's important to recognize that everyone's experience is unique, but with understanding and support, young adults with learning disabilities can thrive and contribute in meaningful ways."

Create inclusive academic and social environments in high school. Efforts may include "visible" changes, such as policy changes that ensure well-implemented school-wide systems of support, or "invisible" changes that make everyone feel seen and appreciated (e.g., intentionally including examples of individuals with disabilities in teaching contexts). Ensure that clubs and extracurricular activities are accessible and represent the interests and strengths of all students.

Enhance pre-service and in-service training for educators on inclusion and personalized learning, focusing on shared distributive leadership among administrators, general educators, and special educators to create more inclusive classrooms and schools.

Ensure systems for transition services, college readiness, and workforce training (e.g., dual enrollment, career and technical education, inclusive Advanced Placement pathways) are equitably promoted and accessed.

Teach all students (with and without disabilities) to self-advocate for their learning and social-emotional needs.

Factors Supporting Postsecondary Enrollment

Feeling accepted and supported by at least one educator in high school is fundamental for young adults with LD to pursue educational opportunities after high school.

What these data tell us

- **21%** never enrolled in a college, university, or vocational, business, or technical school program.

- **79%** enrolled in college, university, or vocational, business, or technical school programs. Of those who have ever enrolled:

  - **35%** graduated from a postsecondary institution
  - **56%** are currently enrolled in postsecondary education
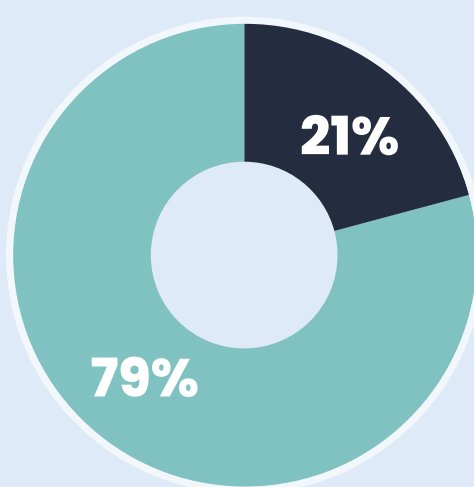 - **9%** attended but never completed their postsecondary education

Feeling accepted and supported by at least one educator in high school is fundamental for young adults with LD to pursue educational opportunities after high school, above and beyond social inclusion, family support, and school connectedness *(see Figure 1 on page 9)*. Those who enrolled in postsecondary education reported higher levels of adult acceptance in high school than those who never enrolled *(see Figure 3)*.

FIGURE 3

Educator Acceptance by Postsecondary Enrollment Status
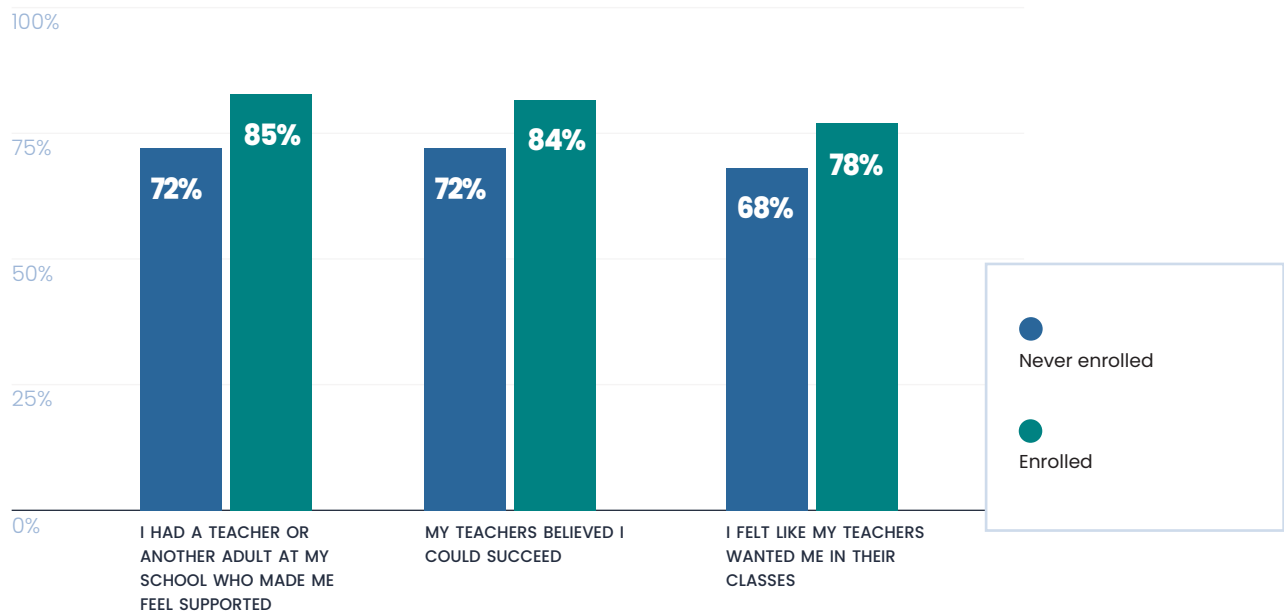
- 72% / 85% — I HAD A TEACHER OR ANOTHER ADULT AT MY SCHOOL WHO MADE ME FEEL SUPPORTED
- 72% / 84% — MY TEACHERS BELIEVED I COULD SUCCEED
- 68% / 78% — I FELT LIKE MY TEACHERS WANTED ME IN THEIR CLASSES

Legend:
- Never enrolled
- Enrolled

Note: *This chart shows the aggregate percentage of young adults who "strongly agree" and "agree" with each statement, disaggregated by whether they ever enrolled at a postsecondary institution. Differences were not tested for statistical significance; this chart shows practical importance. This chart illustrates data collected from questions under the "educator acceptance" factor.*

How can we improve postsecondary enrollment among young adults with LD?

Although there are many pathways to successful professional opportunities, this analysis specifically looked at postsecondary enrollment rates among young adults with LD to better understand barriers to their equitable enrollment. Student perceptions of the extent to which they are accepted and wanted in class by their high school teachers have powerful implications for their postsecondary education. Educators' unchecked biases and stigma related to disability may be hurting student participation in postsecondary education. Alternatively, when young adults with LD perceive solid and supportive relationships with their educators, they may be better equipped to pursue and enroll in postsecondary education.

Findings suggest the need to:

Develop purposeful pre-service and in-service training for general and special educators that dispel negative biases and stigma related to disability and incorporate strengths-based goal-setting, teaching, and intervention.

Use academic and social interventions that support strong student and adult relationships and cultivate a sense of acceptance and belonging in classrooms.

Incentivize and support the inclusion of students with disabilities in advanced coursework opportunities.

Establish rigorous graduation rate goals and college and career readiness measures, specifically among students with disabilities.
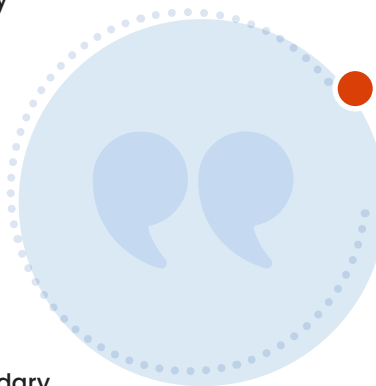
"Having someone who keeps assuring me of what the future holds kept me going despite my learning disability."

Factors Supporting Employment

Young adults' high school experiences with family support, social inclusion, educator acceptance, and school connectedness did not relate to employment status[15]

(see Figure 1)

What these data tell us
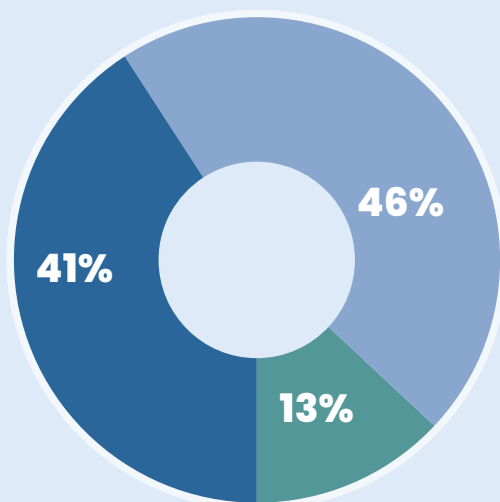
- **46%** do not have a job but are looking
- **41%** have a job
- **13%** do not have a job and are not looking

Note: *Questions about employment were only provided to young adults with LD who are not currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution.*

15 When examining factors related to the outcome of "employment", our statistical analysis grouped young adults who were currently employed with those who were not currently employed but looking under the "employment" outcome to account for the transition between graduating from high school and/or postsecondary and finding a job.

While these factors are vital for fostering a sense of belonging in school, other factors may play a more significant role in shaping employment pathways for young adults with LD, such as access to desirable jobs near affordable housing or their current location, appropriate qualifications, high competition, confidence in applying for aspirational positions, and accessible job applications. This study did not explore these factors.

Postsecondary education is often a primary lever for successful job opportunities, where higher levels of education are related to higher rates of gainful employment. However, the relation between postsecondary education and employment status for young adults in our study was unclear. Individuals took different paths to enter the workforce, and their trajectories to employment were diverse. For example, young adults with LD who never enrolled in postsecondary education had similar employment and unemployment rates to those who enrolled in postsecondary but left before completion *(see Figure 4)*. Further, the percentage of unemployed young adults with LD was consistent across all postsecondary enrollment statuses.
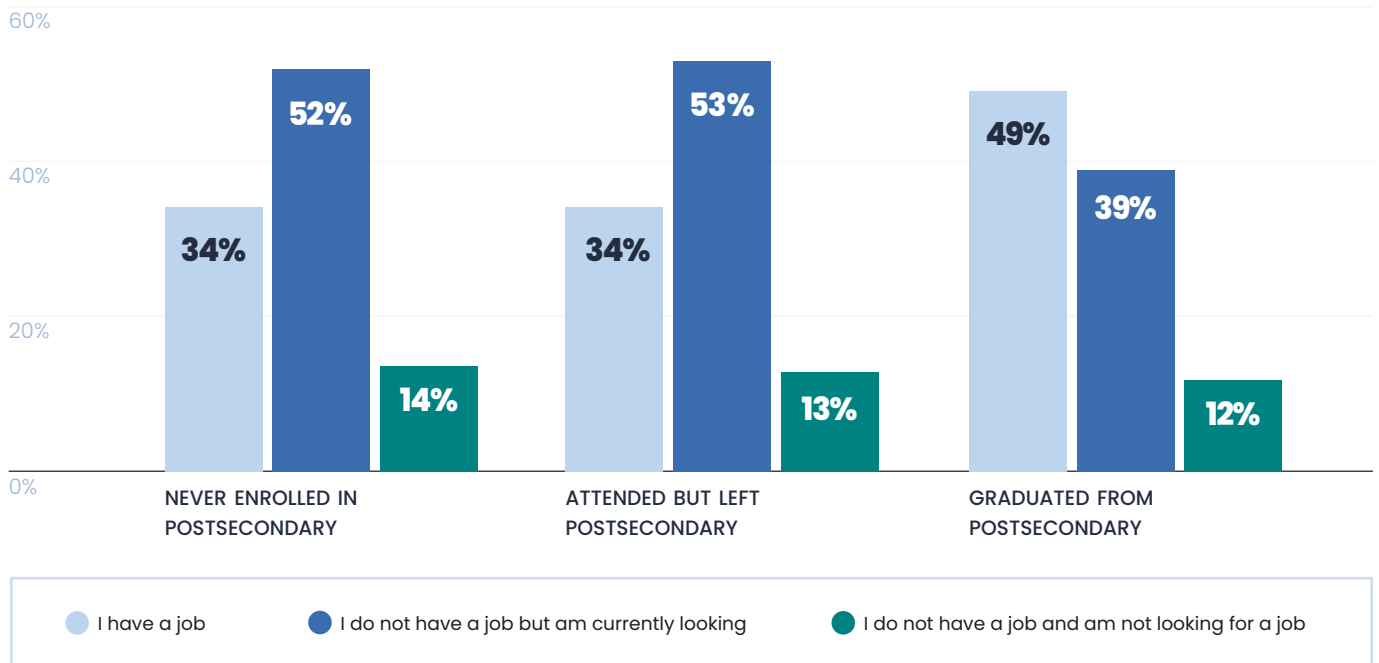
"The learning disability does not prevent me from becoming a valuable person; I still have my own dreams and pursuits."

FIGURE 4

Postsecondary Enrollment Status by Employment Status

Never enrolled in postsecondary
- I have a job: 34%
- I do not have a job but am currently looking: 52%
- I do not have a job and am not looking for a job: 14%

Attended but left postsecondary
- I have a job: 34%
- I do not have a job but am currently looking: 53%
- I do not have a job and am not looking for a job: 13%

Graduated from postsecondary
- I have a job: 49%
- I do not have a job but am currently looking: 39%
- I do not have a job and am not looking for a job: 12%

Legend:
- I have a job
- I do not have a job but am currently looking
- I do not have a job and am not looking for a job

Note: *This chart shows the aggregate percentage of young adults who reported each postsecondary enrollment status disaggregated by their employment status. Differences were not tested for statistical significance; this chart shows practical importance.*

More research is needed to understand the critical factors for successfully navigating the job market and gaining and maintaining employment for young adults with LD. However, the survey provides further insight into the experiences of young adults with LD who are currently in the workforce. Most reported feeling excited about their future careers. Many were reluctant to disclose their disability(ies) to their employer, which may prevent them from receiving the appropriate support to be highly productive. Most of those who asked for accommodations felt it was very beneficial.

For those who are unemployed, but seeking a job, 22% said they were unemployed due to disability discrimination.

For Those Currently Employed...

Career Satisfaction

72%
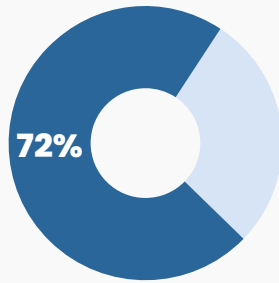
72% were excited about their career.*

Disclosure of LD and Experiences in the Workplace

34%
42%
24%
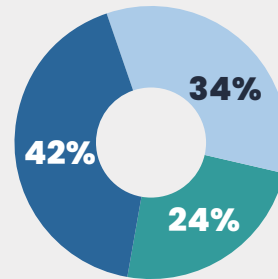
- Formally disclosed their LD at work
- Disclosed their LD but did not provide documentation
- Did not disclose their LD

Accommodations for LDs at Work

40%	60%

- **Received formal or informal accommodations for their LD at work**
  - **83%** found the accommodations they received very useful

- **Have not received formal or informal accommodations at work**
  - **25%** do not believe they need accommodations
  - **18%** did not ask for accommodations due to possible discrimination
  - **12%** did not ask for accommodations for fear of burdering their coworkers
  - **2%** did not know they could receive accommodations
  - **3%** asked for accommodations but were denied

Discrimination in the Workplace**

Overall, **21%** experienced discrimination based on their LD in the workplace.

* This reflects the aggregate percentage of young adults who "strongly agree" and "agree".

** This survey question asked if individuals have ever experienced discrimination in any workplace and is not necessarily specific to individuals' current job.

How can we improve employment outcomes among young adults with LD?

Findings indicate that some young adults with LD may need greater awareness of the benefits of workplace accommodations. Others report fearing that disclosure may lead to discrimination or being viewed as burdensome. These fears indicate a need for employers and managers to create work environments in which employees feel supported in asking for what they need. It may also be necessary to educate young adults about their rights as workers and build their understanding of what accommodations could be helpful in the workplace.

These findings suggest the need to:

Improve transition supports from academic settings to the workforce (e.g., Pre-Employment Training Services), emphasizing self-advocacy for support.

Strengthen the integration of young adults and disabled workers in all Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs.

Develop and support accommodation policies within the workplace that promote easy access, equitable opportunities, and a move beyond compliance for employees with disabilities.

Train and support managers on universal supports, common barriers and misconceptions about individuals with LD, and strategies to foster a more inclusive workplace.

Factors Supporting Dimensions of Well-Being

For young adults with LD, confidence in doing everyday tasks, disability identity and acceptance, perceptions of how society views disability, and awareness of disability rights are imperative for well-being.
(see Figure 5).

What these data tell us

Life and personal satisfaction

- **72%** are satisfied with who they are
- **68%** feel good about their lives
- **67%** are satisfied with their independence

Mental health

- **62%** are currently satisfied with their mental health
- **62%** are confident in their ability to take care of their mental health

Excitement for the future

- **78%** are excited about their future
- **72%** are excited about their career

Note: *These percentages reflect the aggregate of the two most agreeable responses on the 5-point Likert scale.*

FIGURE 5

Factors* Explored for Supporting Well-Being

1 in 3 did not feel confident in their ability to take care of their finances

1 in 3 did not feel confident using the healthcare system

Confidence with daily living skills
focuses on confidence doing specific tasks related to adulthood, such as navigating finances and the health system.

3 in 4 knew how to access disability rights

3 in 4 feel comfortable advocating for disability rights

Awareness of disability rights
captures understanding, awareness of, and advocating for disability rights.

2 in 4 feel their LD had a positive impact on them

2 in 4 were proud to have LD

LD identity and acceptance
captures young adults' perceptions on how LD shapes their personal identities.

2 in 3 believe individuals with disabilities face discrimination

Half feel society fails to accommodate individuals with disabilities

Societal views on disability
captures young adults' perceptions on how society views of disability.

Well-being
captures multiple facets of thriving, including mental health, excitement about the future, and satisfaction with their lives and who they are

What is "well-being"?
In this report, well-being captures multiple facets of thriving, including mental health, excitement about the future, life satisfaction, and self-satisfaction.[16]

What the Results Show...

When it comes to the overall well-being of young adults with LD, confidence with doing everyday tasks, LD identity and acceptance, perceptions of how society views disability, and awareness of disability rights are imperative

Note: *All statistics reflect young adults' current perceptions and experiences. They reflect the aggregate percentage of young adults who responded either affirmatively ("strongly agree" or "agree") or not affirmatively ("uncertain," "disagree," or "strongly disagree") in our sample based on their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale.*

---

16 We acknowledge that there are many ways to conceptualize well-being that vary across cultural and individual factors.

* Each factor listed above included an aggregate of at least three survey items associated with the theme. The image approximates the structural equation model. For more detailed information regarding analysis, see the Young Adult Survey: Technical Report.

When young adults have negative perceptions or experiences in one of these areas, such as a negative perception of their LD or lack of awareness of disability rights, their overall well-being may suffer.

"Living with learning disabilities has taught me resilience and creativity in problem-solving. It's important to recognize that everyone's experience is unique, but with understanding and support, individuals with learning disabilities can thrive and contribute in meaningful ways."

How can we improve well-being among young adults with LD?

Findings indicate that young adults with LD may benefit from support in improving their confidence in daily living skills, awareness of disability rights, confidence with self-advocacy, and positive and integrated identity that includes LD. Awareness of disability rights and protections is particularly critical for well-being. Young adults may need support learning how to use legal knowledge to advocate for themselves, especially when facing discrimination. It is important to note that awareness of disability rights and addressing societal stigma are community responsibilities. Young adults cannot thrive while disability-based societal stigma persists.

In response to these findings, we advocate for the need to:

- Educate the community to dispel the stigma associated with disability.

- Educate families on supporting and advocating for and alongside their loved ones.

- Partner with human resources to develop a shared understanding for building supportive and inclusive work environments.

- Build young adults' self-advocacy skills to better navigate their communities, schools, and workplaces.

- Develop diverse support systems of adults and peers who can serve as solid allies for individuals with LD in the K-12, post-secondary, and workforce settings.

Levers for Policy Change

Young adults with LD have complex and varied experiences, requiring more in-depth examination and nuanced solutions. Still, the experiences of young adults in this study underscore the importance and urgency of advancing federal policy in a way that NCLD and advocates have long supported. The following recommendations are centered around NCLD's strategic pillars and advocacy platforms as we seek to offer reasonable and actionable solutions.

Strengthen regulations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Section 504 is a foundational federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance, including from the U.S. Department of Education (USED). All aspects of Section 504 have robust regulatory requirements, including ensuring a free and appropriate public education, dispelling inequitable discipline, and educating families about the complaint process.

Recommendation

- USED should update Section 504 to support best practices to empower students with disabilities in their transition planning from K-12 systems to postsecondary education, possibly in coordination with the Department of Justice and the requirements of institutions under the ADA.

Invest in and prioritize policies that enhance pre-service educator preparation and in-service educator development.

Many general education teacher preparation programs do not adequately cover strategies for supporting students with or at risk for LD. To improve educators' competency and skills, decision-makers must strengthen the entire educator pipeline by investing in pre- and in-service educator development programs and enacting policies to meet the needs of students with disabilities sufficiently.

Recommendations

- Invest in federal programs and funding streams that support educator preparation, support, and retention.
- Enact certification and licensure policies that promote meaningful systems of support, evaluation, mentoring, and coaching for teacher leaders and principals to meet the needs of individuals with and at risk for LD.
- Enact policies that require all teachers to have training and practical experience in teaching diverse learners before entering the classroom, incentivizing innovation in teacher preparation programs that train general and special education candidates together.
- Collect key school and district-level personnel and resource data on special education and related services.

Improve transition planning and strengthen postsecondary and workforce inclusion.

Students with disabilities should have equitable access to many programs and supports in high school and beyond. Barriers to access must be removed (considering the difference in rights and responsibilities in high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce).

Recommendations
- Expand transition programs so more eligible students receive services, leveraging available resources from state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies.
- Increase advanced coursework opportunities such as dual enrollment and AP/IB coursework programs for students with disabilities.
- Require institutions to accept specific documentation, including individualized education programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans, as evidence of a disability instead of requiring a new psychoeducational evaluation.
- Ensure that students with disabilities who receive accommodations for their pace of study are eligible for financial aid grants.
- Improve the specificity of data collection on students with disabilities in higher education, including graduation and employment outcomes.
- Ensure inclusive workforce development and training programs so individuals with LD can participate successfully.
- Guide human resources on developing and building policies to support individuals with disabilities.

Invest in systems of supports for families, schools, and institutions.

Systems of supports (e.g., a multi-tiered system of supports) require an investment for effective implementation.

Recommendations
- Invest in codified systems of supports for K–12 schools.
- Increase funding for programs to help families of children with disabilities access resources, tools, and training.
- Improve technical assistance for colleges to support students with disabilities, such as developing a clearinghouse for inclusive accessibility and accommodations policies in higher education.

Create more positive school climates to foster inclusion and a sense of belonging.

Students, especially those with disabilities, need a safe, positive learning environment with supportive and affirming adults to succeed in school.

Recommendations

- Invest in evidence-based practices such as comprehensive, multi-tiered support systems, counseling, and trauma-informed care.
- Enact policies to help combat bullying, harassment, and discrimination of students with disabilities.
- Increase investment in policies and programs supporting mental health and care opportunities that are accessible, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed.

Appendix

1. NCLD Mission

The National Center for Learning Disabilities partners with educators, students, families, and young adults to advance innovative research and advocate for equitable policies that address systemic barriers in schools, workplaces, and communities.

2. About WestEd

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that aims to improve the lives of children and adults at all ages of learning and development. We do this by addressing challenges in education and human development, reducing opportunity gaps, and helping build communities where all can thrive. WestEd staff conduct and apply research, provide technical assistance, and support professional learning. We work with early learning educators, classroom teachers, local and state leaders, and policymakers at all levels of government.

3. Acknowledgments

NCLD Contributors

Saashya Rodrigo, Ph.D.

Saashya Rodrigo serves as the Principal Researcher at the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Dr. Rodrigo has extensive expertise as an education researcher, family and teacher consultant, and classroom teacher. Her professional interests encompass diverse topics, including teacher stress and turnover, special education assessment and instruction, and education equity and accessibility.

Laura Stelitano, Ph.D.

Laura Stelitano is the Director of Research and Programs at the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Dr. Stelitano has over a decade of experience leading educational research initiatives centered around making education equitable and accessible for students with disabilities, including through technical assistance, academic and policy-oriented research, and evaluation of youth-serving programs for young people with disabilities. She holds a B.A. in Anthropology from St. Vincent College, a M.Ed. in Special Education from George Mason University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in Learning Sciences and Policy.

Shayna Harris, M.S.W.

Shayna Harris is the Research Manager at the National Center for Learning Disabilities and brings experiences from numerous fields, including K-12 education, higher education, child welfare, and disability services. In addition to her professional experience in social work, she has extensive experience in qualitative and quantitative research administration, research design, data collection, and analyses. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in social work and a graduate-level certification in project management from Florida State University.

Amelia Malone, Ph.D.

Amelia Malone is the founder and principal consultant of ASM Consulting. Dr. Malone is an experienced researcher and works collaboratively to identify effective solutions for improving student achievement. Her research contributions include developing effective instructional methods for students with learning disabilities, advancing best practices for models of prevention and intervention (e.g., multi-tiered system of supports), and translating research into practical and approachable implementation. She received her Ph.D. in Special Education from Vanderbilt University and worked in the department for six years following her doctoral studies. Her experiences in education uniquely position her to align diverse groups across the field to drive innovation and reform for students with disabilities.

WestEd Contributors

Lauren N. Wong, Ph.D.

Lauren N. Wong is a Research Associate in special education at WestEd. She has nearly a decade of experience teaching and conducting research in education settings. Prior to joining WestEd, she was a general and special education teacher. Dr. Wong specializes in quantitative methods and analysis, including multi-level modeling, structural equation modeling, and propensity score analysis, and has extensive experience cleaning and analyzing large-scale state longitudinal data and designing and conducting large-scale survey studies. She is currently co-principal investigator on a federal grant, developing and evaluating an AI reading tutor, and part of the evaluation team on several grants funded through the Institute of Education Sciences and Education Innovation & Research Program through the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Sarah Emily Wilson, Ph.D.

Sarah Emily Wilson is a Research Associate in special education at WestEd and a neurodivergent, learning-disabled adult. She has over a decade of teaching and conducting research in private and public education settings. Prior to joining WestEd, she was a special education teacher in inclusive settings in K-8 schools. She has extensive experience in qualitative and mixed methods design, data collection, and analysis across multiple methodologies, including design-based research, thematic analysis, grounded theory, and phenomenology. Additionally, she has experience in designing and conducting large-scale survey studies, single-case design studies, applying Open Science to research, and project management. Dr. Wilson is part of the design and evaluation teams on several grants funded through the Institute of Education Sciences and Education Innovation & Research Program through the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Currently, she is co-principal investigator for an Office of Special Education Programs grant, developing and evaluating an AI reading tutor.