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## Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

# The Implications of Standards, Assessment, and Accountability on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options

presented by:

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**Ms. Johnson:** Welcome to the teleconference entitled “The Implications of Standards, Assessment, and Accountability on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options.” I’m Donna Johnson, a Research Fellow with the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) here at the University of Minnesota.

As many of you know, NCSET, in partnership with federal agencies and national organizations, is co-hosting a second National Leadership Summit on Improving Results for Youth in Washington, D.C. June 14-15 of this year. At our teleconferences from now until June, NCSET will highlight featured presenters from the National Leadership Summit. Today we are pleased to have the director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), Dr. Martha Thurlow, to address the implications of contemporary U.S. policy and practice for students with disabilities, including national and statewide assessment policies and practices, standard-setting efforts, and graduation requirements. Dr. Thurlow has conducted research in special education for the past 30 years in a variety of areas, including assessment and decision making, learning disabilities, dropout prevention, effective classroom instruction, and integration of students with disabilities into general education settings.

**Dr. Thurlow:**<sup>1</sup> I’m happy to be here today to talk about graduation requirements and diploma options. This is a topic that has a new complexion within the current context of standards, assessments, and accountability. It’s important that we continue to examine this topic and consider the consequences of various policy decisions for students with disabilities and continue to look for evidence-based practices for options to improve the outcomes of students with disabilities.

I hope today to be able to address the status of what is and identify issues and what can be. I have a lot of slides in my PowerPoint, and I will try to move rapidly so that we have time for questions and answers.<sup>2</sup> I have

four general topics to address:

1. Increasing Standards—New Pressures: the pressure for increasing standards at the high school level, specifically, for students to complete school with the regular diploma;
2. AYP [adequate yearly progress] Complications—With and Without Assessments: the complications that have been added to graduation and high school assessments and how these complicate matters for students with disabilities;
3. Diploma Options and Issues: what they mean for the educational outcomes of students with disabilities; and
4. Evidence-Based Practices: indications of improved outcomes on graduation exams and practices that promote those outcomes. I think we always need to be looking at some of those indicators of success and how that success is achieved.

<sup>3-6</sup> Starting with Increasing Standards and New Pressures, we know that the current context of standards-based education has given new focus to improving outcomes for all students. There have been lots of specific efforts and lots of talk about graduation, but there have been few recent efforts that specifically look at graduation outcomes.

- Achieve, an organization that looks at the diploma, has created a three-year project called the American Diploma Project, which is devoted to examining the diploma requirements in the states. They have had several reports that look at what’s going on in this area, and they’ve noted the lack of rigor of current requirements for graduation. Two recent reports to pay attention to are “Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts” and “The Expectations Gap: A 50-State Review of High School Graduation Requirements.” To access them, go to: <http://www.achieve.org/achieve.nsf/Publications?openform>
- Another study released this month, by Peter D.

*Superscript numbers refer to refer to the slide of the accompanying PowerPoint being discussed.*

Hart Research Associates, interviewed public high-school graduates in the classes of 2002, 2003, and 2004, including 861 students currently in two- and four-year colleges and 626 high-school graduates not currently enrolled in college, including 257 who had been enrolled in college but who had withdrawn. They also interviewed 40 employers and 300 instructors who teach first-year students at two- and four-year colleges. They interviewed people who are interested in students going beyond their high-school years. We don't know how many of the students were students with disabilities, but we can imagine that a significant proportion of them were, or least some proportion of them were. Major conclusions drawn from this study are that:

- Many high school graduates are not prepared for college or entry-level jobs. The majority of students in college or in the workforce say that they are not prepared for either setting that they're in, and about 40% of the students say they're not prepared for what is expected of them, and this is confirmed by college instructors and employers.
- College students have gaps in preparation for academic expectations. About 14% of college students feel that they are able to do what is expected of them across six dimensions.
- Non-students have gaps in job skills. Those who have gone into vocational situations also say they are not prepared for what is expected of them.
- Real-world experiences of those who withdrew from college also show gaps in preparation.

I'm not going to go into all of the detail of these findings, but it's a quick view of what's happening with the students who are leaving our high schools.

- Employers agree that high school education leaves many students unprepared.
- College instructors are the harshest critics of public high schools. They estimate that 42% of high school graduates are not adequately prepared by their high schools for college classes and are struggling or having to take remedial courses to catch up.
- The quality of preparation the students receive in high school is closely associated with high expectations and solid academic standards. Related to that finding, one-fourth of all high school graduates said that they faced high academic expectations in high school and were more likely to feel well prepared for the expectations of college and to be performing well or to be well prepared for the expectations of work.

- Beyond the decision to go to college, demographics have less impact. When they divided between those who went to college and those who didn't go to college, within those two groups, they found small differences for demographic groups of income and race.
- Knowing what they know now, high school graduates would have worked harder and chosen a more rigorous curriculum.
- Higher standards, tougher courses, and more evaluations are strongly supported by all who participated.

The title of that report is "Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for Work?"

<sup>7</sup> The second topic that I want to discuss is Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Complications. On one hand, we have a lot of information telling us that we don't have enough rigor in what we're getting in high school for all students, including students with disabilities. On the other hand, we have AYP considerations and school accountability that we are considering at the same time. If we raise high school standards, what's going to happen with our AYP requirements? We have a little bit of a conundrum and this is what I wanted to touch base on, the complications that are created by AYP, reflecting the accountability measure of No Child Left Behind. If those standards are raised, then what's going to happen with AYP?

<sup>8</sup> There are a couple of factors to consider. One of those factors is the graduation rate, which is a high school indicator for calculating AYP for No Child Left Behind. The only diplomas that were to count as indicators of graduation were standard diplomas or anything considered to be higher than a standard diploma, such as an honors diploma or some kind of endorsement on a diploma. Certificates of attendance, special education diplomas, and things like taking too long to earn the standard diploma do not earn school accountability points unless a variation has been approved as part of a school accountability plan. There's been a summary of what has been approved by Erpenbach, Forte-Fast, and Potts (2003) prepared for the Council of Chief State School Officers. They did an analysis of states' plans and found that there have been some states that requested a variation in their definition of graduation rate, an indicator that goes into AYP. In order to get a higher graduation rate, can you have more rigorous requirements? Well, probably you're going to worry about having more rigorous requirements. In school accountability plans, the primary exception has been to allow an extra year to obtain a standard diploma when this has been consistent with an educational philosophy already evident in the

state or to allow the IEP team—for students with disabilities—to determine the number of years to obtain a standard diploma. Those have been the kinds of exceptions allowed. GEDs or other types of exit documents are not allowed to be included in the graduation rate calculations for NCLB accountability. We still hear about some states increasing their graduation requirements. In the February 7 Education Daily, there was an article about Indiana raising its graduation requirements. We're in a period of conflict between increasing the rigor, raising the graduation requirements, and attention to AYP, and what we're going to do to meet some of those requirements, such as the graduation rate requirement.

Slide <sup>9</sup> talks about another issue, the assessment piece. There's not a requirement for a graduation exam to be part of the AYP calculation, but several states have decided that their graduation exams will be the exam that counts at the high school level. When students have to pass the test to graduate, that adds another hurdle, and then for that to be counted as the NCLB test, it almost counts twice. I've listed the states that have indicated they are using their graduation exam also as their NCLB exam. There are 15 states: Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. There are additional states that are planning to have exit exams that look like they're planning to have those as No Child Left Behind counting exams. The fact that we will have this kind of double situation has implications for students with disabilities.

Available on the NCEO Web site at <http://education.umn.edu/nceo/OnlinePubs/Technical36.htm>, the National Study on Graduation Requirements and Diploma Options for Youth with Disabilities report discusses who has which kind of diploma options based on data collected in 2002. It is important to review people's considerations of the consequences of some of those different diploma options. So today, I have highlighted opinions about the consequences of some of these.

Slides <sup>10-11</sup> look at some of the consequences that we perceive of students having to pass exit exams to obtain a standard diploma and we looked both at intended and unintended consequences. Some of the perceived intended consequences are that:

- More students will participate in the general education curriculum and achieve results;
- There will be higher academic expectations that will improve access to postsecondary education and employment;
- Differences between general education and special education will be reduced;

- Exit exams signify a minimum standard for all students and give clear meaning and values to diplomas earned; and
- Educators will use differentiated instructional strategies, including accommodations, to assist students in meeting higher academic standards and passing exit exams.

State directors of special education shared these opinions with us. There have been few studies that have actually been able to track what the consequences are, and studies that have been done have come up with contradictory results. A couple of weeks ago in Education Week there was another study that reported where they found an association between states having high school exit exams and lower achievement. They identified lower achievement, because they found lower overall SAT scores. Right away people were contesting the results of that research for a number of reasons, and every time a study is done, the same kind of thing happens—there are reasons why the results are contested.

Slides <sup>12-13</sup> show that state directors talked about unintended consequences of having to pass an exit exam to earn a standard diploma. Concerns were that

- Some students with disabilities will fail to receive a diploma, resulting in higher dropout rates;
- Students' self-esteem is lowered by repeated failures;
- Dissatisfaction and conflict of parents may result, and the possibility for lawsuits may occur, because we know that some of these consequences have come to be;
- Some students may need to remain in school longer to meet requirements of a standard diploma; and
- State and local districts may be forced to create alternative diplomas and pathways to ensure that students exit with some form of high school exit credentials.

Jane Krentz and I were on a NCSET teleconference where we talked about some of the alternative routes to the diploma (see [http://www.ncset.org/teleconferences/transcripts/2004\\_04.asp](http://www.ncset.org/teleconferences/transcripts/2004_04.asp)) and that report is going to be on the NCEO Web site. Synthesis Report 54 addresses alternative routes to the standard diploma, which does happen and is an important part of having exit exams (that is, having alternative routes for students who cannot take a pencil and paper test or cannot demonstrate their knowledge and skills on a paper and pencil test).

Slide <sup>14</sup> portrays the status of graduation exams in the U.S., indicating which states have required graduation exams and which ones require districts to have graduation exams. Again, what I wanted to do is give a snapshot of where states are in terms of graduation exams and to indicate that we know states have graduation exams com-

ing on board, and right now they are addressing whether or not they will have an array of diploma options. They are thinking about what those options will look like and other kinds of factors that will come into play.

The information we have about graduation exams needs to be updated, and a new survey is going to be conducted soon to get the latest information. It's important to keep this information up-to-date, especially in relationship to students with disabilities. I believe it's possible that states now have alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards that may play a role in states' exit exam considerations. I suspect this because I've heard discussions in states about students who are proficient on the alternate assessment may earn a certain kind of certificate, which then qualifies them for a diploma. Students who do not reach proficiency on the alternate assessment would not receive a certificate, and then they would not earn a diploma. This opens up a whole new kind of consideration and some additional issues that states may have to work on if they follow that kind of pathway. There are some new issues that may come along as our assessment systems are diversifying in the ways that they are.

Slides <sup>15-16</sup> show that there are several diploma options available for all students and some just for students with disabilities. The meaning of different options is not always clear so I've listed some of the broad category names: standard diploma, IEP, special education diploma, certificate of achievement, certificate of attendance, occupational diploma, and modified diploma. Although NCLB has said that the standard diploma is what is counted in graduation rates for AYP purposes, states have a history of having many options available for students. Attempts to include many of these in the AYP graduation rate were not successful, yet most states have kept the array of options that they have had.

Slide <sup>16</sup> indicates the hidden issue that we have not talked about: standard diplomas may be obtained under very different conditions yet be treated the same. Students who are getting the standard diploma may get that standard diploma in different ways, yet for No Child Left Behind, it's viewed as being the same thing. For example, students may be excused from taking a test yet be able to get a standard diploma because they have met their IEP goals. In some states, students may be able to pass a test at a lower level and still receive a standard diploma.

Situations like the list shown on slide <sup>17</sup> need to be viewed with great caution. The National Center of Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) has taken this graduation rate information and listed from the states, the highest graduation rate and then down. I took the states with the ten top graduation rates according

to that list. Hawaii was first, then Ohio, then Arkansas. These data are for 2002-03 and reflect the OSEP data for students ages 14-21. The states in the top ten for graduation rate include states with and without exit exams. They also include states that do and do not have diploma options. Some of the states on the list allow students with disabilities to use alternate means to earn the standard diploma that are not allowed in other states. Compatibility of the data is a huge question, as stated on NCSEAM's Web site. Even though it's stated there, you can't understand exactly what that means unless you know that in some of these states students can meet a lower standard to get a standard diploma. In some of these states, the students have to meet the exact same standard as every other student to get the diploma. That's the hidden issue that we have to deal with or at least acknowledge.

Slides <sup>18-19</sup> list some of the consequences identified for using multiple diploma options. Our state directors identified both intended and unintended, and we'll start with the intended:

- The possibility of having increased numbers of students within the state receiving some form of high school diploma;
- Local school districts having more flexibility in determining the manner of student exit;
- Creating options that are viewed as motivating and engaging for students with disabilities and that would reduce the dropout rate;
- The ability to recognize general education students for high performance in relation to honors diplomas would be increased; and
- A state is better able to maintain high academic standards for its regular, or standard, diploma when alternate diploma options are available.

Slides <sup>20-22</sup> list some of the unintended consequences of having multiple diploma options:

- IEP teams fail to hold students with disabilities accountable to pass high school exit exams; expectations are lowered for some students with disabilities;
- Alternative diploma options are viewed as substandard;
- There's a perception that the use of multiple diplomas will result in developing special tracks for students to follow—in other words, we view a student who is going into the special education diploma as needing to be put only in those kinds of classes;
- Communicating different options to parents and students is problematic;
- Access to postsecondary education programs for students with diplomas other than the standard diploma is limited if the alternative diploma is viewed as

watered-down in content or is of little meaning to the postsecondary education system admissions staff; and

- Interpreting the meaning of different diploma options in terms of a student's skills and abilities is confusing for employers.

Special education directors also talked about intended and unintended consequences of having a single diploma option—of course, this would be the standard diploma. Slides <sup>23-24</sup> show that:

- More students with disabilities earn the standard diploma, and this was an intended consequence;
- There would be high expectations for students, including students with disabilities, and these would be maintained;
- Having a single diploma option helps build consistency regarding the meaning of the requirements associated with the diploma. All students work on the same state standards, so it's a little clearer;
- The single option provides future employers and postsecondary education institutions a clearer and more detailed record of the student's performance; and
- The single option creates an important sense of equity. All students are extended the same options, tested on the same standards, and viewed by school personnel, as well as community members, as equally participating.

<sup>25-27</sup> Unintended consequences of having a single diploma option—these are the ones state directors of special education told us. While this is a list, discussions about these tend to be very emotional because they reflect strong beliefs that underlie the consequences.

- As graduation requirements increase, fewer students actually receive a standard diploma—this is a perceived consequence;
- The dropout rate may increase as students who cannot meet high standards and cannot pass statewide test opt to drop out;
- The standard diploma becomes perceived as too general and watered down;
- In order to help students with disabilities to meet the requirement for a standard diploma, states lowering their overall standards for general education students is a concern; and
- The numbers of special education students remaining in school up to age 21 may be increased, because they cannot meet all of the requirements of a standard diploma earlier.

<sup>28</sup> I thought it was important to end with some actual data, not just talk about what we think the consequences are, but to really begin to look at some data while we wait

for more longitudinal data to see what states are finding. I've got graduation exam data from Massachusetts, a state that has been reporting its graduation exam data in ways that make it easy to see what's happening for subgroups with retesting and across the years. We need more state data on Web sites that are in an easy-to-look-at format. If your state is a state that has data in this format, I'd be very happy to find out about that, so share that with me.

Slide <sup>29</sup> shows Massachusetts's competency determinations. MCAS is their graduation exam, and grade 10 is the first grade in which they take this exam. For the class of 2003, this figure shows how they perform the first time they take the test and then on their retesting opportunities. It shows regular education students and students with disabilities. You see that the first time students with disabilities take this test, 30% of them earn the competency determination. That means they pass the test the first time. By the sixth retest, 85% of them have passed.

Slide <sup>30</sup> shows the class of 2004, and you see that the first time they take the test, 32% pass. It's showing progress across the years as well as retesting opportunities. By the fourth retesting opportunity, 84% of the class of 2004 has passed, whereas it took to the sixth retesting opportunity for the class of 2003. It takes going back and forth between these two slides to be able to see a couple of different ways in which progress is being made.

<sup>31</sup> Massachusetts has another slide that shows four classes of data over time. Each class has different amounts of data because they haven't had as many retesting opportunities, but it shows how, on their first testing opportunity at grade 10, their first time taking the test, their percentage passing has increased, and then how they're performing better on each retesting opportunity, so their performance is going up over time as well.

Currently in Massachusetts, researchers are asking about the characteristics of schools and classrooms where students with disabilities are performing better than expected. Slide <sup>32</sup> shows a study that's been conducted at the University of Massachusetts by the Donahue Institute, called the Donahue Institute Study, which identified urban districts in schools that demonstrated better than expected Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) achievement. They looked at the achievement of students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8 in districts that were identified as urban based on two criteria, enrollment of 4,000 students or more and demography that placed them in the lower half of the state's demographic distribution of communities.

Slides <sup>33-37</sup> delineate the findings of this comprehensive study, which identified 11 practices as central to the success of the urban districts and schools, and for

them to achieve success for students with disabilities to perform better than expected. I thought it was important to highlight these because even though we're talking about diploma options, we're talking about graduation requirements and we're doing this within the context of standards, assessments, and accountability. It goes back to what is happening in terms of our practices for kids and it will always go back to what do we need to do to be successful there. I thought that this study was particularly relevant because it honed in on students with disabilities and what was happening for them to be performing better than expected. I'm going to highlight the 11 practices identified in this study, and then I'm going to open it up to questions.

1. Pervasive emphasis on curriculum alignment with the Massachusetts framework. At both the district and school levels there was a tremendous emphasis on curriculum alignment with the curriculum framework in Massachusetts. Everything was evaluated in the schools and then in the districts per fidelity with the framework. Attention to this was considered fundamental to the achievement of all students, including those with disabilities.
2. Effective systems to support curriculum alignment, including the common element of staff whose positions are accountable for supporting and monitoring curriculum at the school building or classroom levels. They had people who kept track of that and watched to make sure that was happening.
3. Emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum. That emphasis was reflected in the considerable attention that was given to the delivery of the general education curriculum to all students.
4. Culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement. The study's authors reported that school leaders and most staff related a firm and convincing belief that students with special needs should pursue mastery of the general curriculum, and that most of them can succeed on a test if properly prepared. These beliefs reflect the culture in practices and support high standards in student achievement.
5. Well-disciplined academic and social environment. (I'm only giving a snapshot of what's in the report, so I would encourage you to go to the Web site, <http://www.donahue.umassp.edu/>, and look at in more detail at what the study and the authors report.) The popular notion that students with special needs are disruptive or exhibit behavior problems was not reflected in these schools. There was a well-disciplined academic and social environment maintained. The positive school climate was attrib-

uted to specific elements of their operations such as proactive behavior management.

6. Use of student assessment data to inform decision-making. This was a routine that shaped the curriculum, lesson planning, approaches to instruction of individual students in the identification of students who may be at risk academically.
7. Unified practice supported by targeted professional development. The authors referred to a belief of school staff that we are all on the same page. So everything was focused in on a standard and making everything revolve around that.
8. Access to resources to support key initiatives. These were clearly targeted to certain areas such as literacy rather than social studies and science.
9. Effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment. There was a clear emphasis on quality of staff—effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment were essential practices.
10. Flexible leaders and staff that work effectively in a dynamic environment.

The first 10 practices are *results* of effective leadership. The eleventh is "Effective leadership is essential to success." Across sites, leaders were observed to have a very clear direction and a strong commitment to building systems that support the success of all students. And essential leadership is really a very key part of that.

That was a whirlwind trip through increased standards, AYP complications, diploma options and issues, and some evidence-based practices. Now we will open it up to comments and questions.

**Mr. Clark:** This is Gary Clark from Kansas. On slide <sup>9</sup>, I just wanted some clarification. The way it's stated there, it seems like a double whammy in terms of students having to pass a test to graduate, and then sometimes these tests are the NCLB test, too. That seems like a twofer—that is, you don't have to do more than one, rather than two things, a double whammy is what I'm saying. In other words, if one test does it all, then they can meet the NCLB standards and graduation versus having to take maybe a state assessment and NCLB, which would be a double whammy.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yes, okay. You're right, and I'm right. So you're right, that they are getting both the graduation test and the NCLB test, so they don't have to attempt two different things. My consideration was that they are having that test counted for the NCLB test, and it's also going into the graduation rate requirement. Does that make sense?

**Mr. Clark:** Yeah, that's a slight difference in the way that we'd just be looking at it just in terms of the exam

versus the consequences of that exam and what it would count for.

**Ms. Dohrman:** I'm calling from Georgia. First I'd like to just clear what I thought I heard, and you can tell me if I heard you correctly, and then I'll ask my question. I'm coming from the caveat that you titled "Hidden Issues," and you stated that arbitrary states have eluded the "No Child Left Behind" federal law by allowing some special ed students to meet a different set of requirements and still earn a standard diploma. Did I hear you correctly?

**Dr. Thurlow:** Well, I don't think I said it that way. I said there were some hidden issues in the standard diploma. But I didn't go so far as to say "No Child Left Behind."

**Ms. Dohrman:** My question is you did say that some states have been able to allow special education students to graduate with a standard diploma through different means.

**Dr. Thurlow:** Yes, I did.

**Ms. Dohrman:** Okay, now my question is, because of what I hear about the graduation rate and how it's calculated, and the definition that I use until further notice is the one that's used by the National Center for Educational Statistics, and it does have the special ed diploma and the denominator of that graduation rate. My question was that because I was also reading the transcript by Margaret Spelling, the new Secretary for the U.S. Department of Education, and she was referring to some states who were not in full compliance with testing issues for special education, I was wondering were these some of the things that, perhaps, she was alluding to with this whole testing question? Because I get asked that a lot.

**Dr. Thurlow:** I really can't speak to what she might have been alluding to, but my guess would be that that was not it. I mean my guess would be that she was referring to some states that may not have their alternate assessment in place yet or that don't have all their kids in their regular assessment. That still is an issue. Or they're not reporting on their general assessments yet or their students with disabilities disaggregated. I believe there are still some broader issues that she might have been referring to.

**Ms. Wodraska:** I'm with the Arizona Supreme Court. I oversee detention education throughout Arizona, and I was wondering if you have any of this information, have you looked at correctional education statistics and how the standardized tests are affecting the youngsters that are involved in correctional education, whether long-term or short-term?

**Dr. Thurlow:** No, but that's a very good question.

So can you add a little bit to your question in terms of are you wondering about increased rates of things going into correctional or—?

**Ms. Wodraska:** Well, I'm sure you know in Arizona we have several thousand youngsters that go through our correctional education system every year in detention, juvenile corrections, jail schools, and adult corrections. And a large percentage are being identified as special ed whether they come into us that way or we identify them through child find. We do have a standardized test, the AIMS test, in Arizona, and there has been some controversy about the validity of the test and the educational requirements tied to that test and the youngsters that are in an incarcerated status when they must take the test. I was wondering if any of this information has been looked at through a secure-care correctional education lens?

**Dr. Thurlow:** No, I do not believe it has. I do know there is a study going on that's looking at some of the issues around segregated settings, and correctional institutions may be part of that study. But I'm not specifically sure exactly what questions are being asked. So it would be well worth connecting you with that person. Or if there's a way to do that. If you could email me at [thurl001@umn.edu](mailto:thurl001@umn.edu), I could try to do that for you.

**Ms. Johnson:** I'd like to thank Dr. Thurlow for sharing her time and expertise with us, and our next NCSET teleconference will feature Eduardo Garcia of the National Council of La Raza. Mr. Garcia will present on the Escalara Project, a national career preparation initiative for Latino youth. This teleconference will be held on Tuesday, March 22 at 1:00 Central Time. So I hope you will be able to join us. Thanks again for participating, and thank you, Martha.

*This teleconference was coordinated by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition.*

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