

Why GAO Did This Study

Research suggests that youth with ASD are less likely than youth with other disabilities to be successful in transitioning to work and postsecondary education and therefore, they may face a lifetime of reliance on public assistance. GAO was asked to examine services provided under IDEA to assist youth with ASD in transitioning to adulthood. For this report, GAO examined (1) services and supports provided to assist youth with ASD in transitioning to adulthood, (2) key challenges in successfully transitioning, and (3) the extent to which federal agencies have collaborated to assist in the transition.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations and conducted a nationally generalizable survey of 588 school districts to gather information on services provided in school year 2015-16. GAO also interviewed federal officials and state and local stakeholders in three states selected to highlight a mix of localities with and without initiatives serving this population, urbanicity, and geographic dispersion, and GAO evaluated federal collaborative efforts against leading practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to federal agencies, including one to Education to examine the merits and implications of amending IDEA to require earlier transition planning and one to HHS to enhance collaboration with non-IACC member agencies. Education neither agreed nor disagreed with the IDEA recommendation. The agencies generally agreed with or did not comment on other recommendations.

View [GAO-17-352](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

YOUTH WITH AUTISM

Federal Agencies Should Take Additional Action to Support Transition-Age Youth

What GAO Found

According to GAO's nationwide survey of school district special education directors, GAO estimates that about 85 percent of districts in school year 2015-16, provided youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) services such as instruction on life, social, and behavioral skills, as they transition from high school to adulthood. ASD is a group of complex developmental disorders characterized by difficulties with social interactions, communication, and repetitive behaviors. Districts provided these services as part of the planning for the transition to adulthood required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Fewer, though still a majority of, districts reported providing certain types of employment-related supports. For example, GAO estimates that 69 percent provided work experiences and 63 percent provided job coaching. While the majority of districts reported providing transition services to students with ASD, the services provided varied by factors such as the size and poverty level of the district, according to GAO's analysis of survey responses.

Youth with ASD face key challenges transitioning from high school to adulthood, such as untimely transition planning by school districts, complex adult service systems, and lack of job opportunities, according to stakeholders. IDEA requires districts to begin providing transition services when students with disabilities reach age 16, with the option to start earlier. However, according to GAO's prior work and stakeholders GAO interviewed, providing discretion in this area may not serve some students well. School officials, advocates, and others report that earlier transition planning—with age 14 commonly cited—can have multiple benefits such as allowing more time to obtain important work and academic experiences; however, the Department of Education (Education) is not funding research on the appropriate age to begin transition planning. Unless Education, which administers IDEA, examines the merits of earlier transition planning, policymakers may not have critical information when considering changes to IDEA. Currently, about 32 percent of districts begin transition planning when students are older than age 14, according to GAO's analysis of survey responses.

While the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC) has facilitated collaboration across its member agencies, including Education, to support research for transition-age youth with ASD, it has missed opportunities to collaborate with relevant nonmember agencies. Specifically, the Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education, and Support Act of 2014 calls for the IACC to include in its strategic plan, as practicable, services for individuals with ASD. However, HHS has not regularly engaged certain federal agencies that provide services or financial assistance to transition-age youth with ASD, but are not IACC members, such as the Departments of Labor and Housing and Urban Development. These agencies are not part of working groups tasked with updating the current strategic plan nor has HHS invited them to join the IACC. As a result, IACC may continue to miss opportunities to leverage the knowledge of other agencies—a leading practice for effective federal interagency collaboration—as it works to fulfill its expanded responsibilities under the Act and improve the well-being of individuals with ASD.