

A Look at the Consumer's Perspective of Secondary Special Education: Implications for the Role of Vocational Special Educators

By Larry J. Kortering and Patricia M. Braziel, Appalachian State University

Abstract

The low rate of school completion among youth identified as learning disabled (LD) suggests a need to improve secondary special education programs. One promising approach to improvement involves tailoring programs to the perceptions of their consumers. This study offers insight into one such approach. More specifically, 114 9th grade youth with learning disabilities offered comments about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of school, the best and worst part of school, how a teacher had really helped them to learn, changes that would help them or their peers to stay in and complete school, and general recommendations for improving school. Their comments yield information so vocational special educators can develop more effective secondary vocational programs.

Introduction

The low rate of school completion among youth in special education programs remains a persistent problem. The Office of Special Education Programs suggests that youth with disabilities fail to complete school at a rate that doubles that of general education peers (Capital Publications, 1997). More specifically, the Office of Special Education Programs (1999) provides data that shows a ratio of one graduate (diploma or certificate) for every 1.2 dropouts (known dropouts only) or 1.4 (known dropouts and those exited for unknown reasons). These data suggest a successful school completion rate of 42 to 45 percent. This rate of school completion falls well short of the 85% national average among all youth in 1995 (McMillen, Kaufman, & Klein, 1997). The 85% rate includes the 7% of former students who earn the General Education Development (GED) diploma (Murnane, Willet, & Parker-Boudett, 1995). However, indications are that youth who drop out of a special education program seldom earn a GED (Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials, 1999; Horn & Berktold, 1999).

The low rate of school completion is a serious problem given its implications. Research shows that students who fail to graduate from general education programs endure higher rates of unemployment or underemployment, a trend that continues to worsen (Bound & Johnson, 1992). School dropouts also experience higher rates of unexpected parenthood (Coley, 1995)

and drug use (Swaim & Beauvis, 1997), while accounting for over one-half of prisoners and heads of households on welfare (Coley, 1995). The research on what happens to youth with LD who fail to complete school is limited (see Kortering & Braziel, 1998; Sitlington & Frank, 1993), but it is unlikely that they enjoy better adulthood outcomes than that reported for general education peers (Collett-Klingenberg, 1998). This scenario directs attention to a key role for vocational special educators – directing interventions that prepare youth for positive postschool outcomes while engaging them so that they stay in school.

Support for Research on Youth Perceptions

The idea that youth, as consumers, have perceptions worthy of being considered when developing services derives support from three sources. First, special education, as a profession, lays claim to developing educational programs that respond to the unique needs of youth with disabilities. Insight into these unique needs would seem to require attention to what the youth have to say about their education. Second, an appreciation for youth perceptions of school reflects a respect for experience-based knowledge (McClure & Bassegy, 1991), and a belief that consumers should play a crucial role in determining service quality (Walker, 1993). Edgar (1998) also suggested that listening to others, which ostensibly would include youth in special education programs, is an essential step in developing an understanding of

complex issues and their solutions. Finally, the Total Quality Education (TQE) movement provides support for listening to the voices of one's consumers. Total Quality Management (TQM), a prevalent movement that reshaped many of this country's business sectors, stresses that quality services derive from having a product or service that proves responsive to the perceived needs of one's target consumer (Audette & Algozinne, 1992).

Despite the apparent logic of listening to youth with disabilities, Reid and Button (1995) noted surprise that "we have not

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listened to their voices" (p. 119). A few researchers have offered insight into the perceptions of youth with LD by listening to their ideas and concerns. The resulting studies provide information on whether secondary programs respond to the unique needs of youth as they prepare for the transition from school to work. These studies have examined youth perceptions about how their learning disabilities affect success in school (Guterman, 1995; Stone, 1997) and youth perceptions of their secondary special education programs (Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Morningstar, 1997; Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995; Vaughn, Schumm, & Kouzekanani, 1993).

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF HOW LEARNING DISABILITIES AFFECT SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

Youth perceptions of the role they play, including the impact of their learning disability, represent an important consideration of programs that strive to

prepare youth with disabilities for a productive adulthood. The goal of transitioning to a productive adulthood requires secondary programs that help youth develop an accurate understanding of their strengths and limitations, especially in the context of career ambitions. This self-understanding, as initially described by Parsons (1909), has long been identified as a foundation for one's ability to formulate suitable career aspirations and to make effective career-related decisions. This self-understanding also proves important in identifying ways in which individual students feel they can improve their behavior or succeed in school.

Stone (1997) found that youth with LD overestimate their academic skill levels, at least relative to the perceptions of their parents and teachers. Stone suggested that this overestimation might be a function of the poor meta-cognitive skills associated with learning disabilities or an attempt to protect their self-image as had been suggested by Alvarez and Adelman (1986). Guterman (1995) interviewed nine youth with LD. Most of these youth, over time, came to accept their learning disability as a deficiency of basic skills or a need for additional time to master skills. These youth gradually gained an awareness of how it affected their life in and outside of school and developed various ways to compensate for their limitations.

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIFIC FEATURES OF SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

Morningstar (1997) used a focus group format to examine the perceptions of 71 youth in special education, including 56 identified as LD. Over half of the participants expressed career ambitions consistent with an occupation held by one of their parents. Many youth also felt

that their parents would help them find a job, or even get them a job where they worked. A second study, conducted by Morningstar, Turnbull, and Turnbull (1995), reviewed the perceptions of 40 youth with handicapping conditions (18 with LD). Most of the youth again reported career ambitions in line with a job held by one of their parents. Youth also felt that their parents should be involved in their planning for the future, yet reported that parents were not involved in any systematic transition planning. Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) recently reported on two studies, one of which focused on participant perceptions of the utility and effectiveness of their special transition program. They used six focus groups, involving 45 youth with mostly mild disabilities, to identify program and staff characteristics that participants perceived as effective. Participants identified the importance of individualized services and attention, consistent staff support, and the opportunity to pursue self-identified career-related goals.

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important component of responsive secondary special education programs. Vaughn, Schumm, and Kouzekanani (1993) examined how youth with LD perceived teacher accommodations and adaptations. These youth, who were in general education for more than one-half of their school day, preferred teachers who made adaptations but avoided special treatment that might lead peers to consider them as different. Sawyer et al.

(1996) interviewed 10 youth with LD about effective homework practices. Youth reported that helpful teachers permitted questions about assignments and that teachers were the most common source of homework assistance. They also perceived a variety of motivational problems that affected their homework success (e.g., being careless, not caring about homework, and failing to spend enough time on homework). Morningstar (1997) found that about one-half of the youth in

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her focus groups were in school-based vocational programs. Youth reported that these vocational experiences had little effect on their career aspirations. Most youth found little connection between expressed career interests and their respective area of vocational training. Finally, Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) concluded that effective school to work programs, as perceived by youth, yield three benefits: the individualization of services around student-identified goals; activities that prove relevant and meaningful; and services that help youth to better understand themselves while developing self-confidence in who they are.

The overall purpose of this study is to provide information that would help educators to better understand the perceptions youth with LD have of their high school programs. Specifically, youths provided responses as to what they perceived as advantages and disadvantages to staying in school, the best and worst parts of school, examples of how high school teachers had

really helped them to learn, changes that would help them to stay in and complete school, and changes to improve school. The responses, in combination, provide insight into how vocational special educators can improve high school programs.

Method

This study adds to the knowledge on the perceptions of youth with LD. The reported findings provide insight into secondary program features that affect the quality of services, as perceived by youth. This quality or consumer satisfaction may be the necessary linchpin for secondary programs that prove effective in keeping (or holding) youth in school.

Setting

Two county school districts in a southeastern state were the setting for this study. Census data from 1995 showed county population densities that ranked 25th and 36th among the states' 100 counties, high school completion rates of 67% and 72% among adults 25 and over. The 1995 Census data also showed unemployment rates of 4.6% and 3.4%, as compared to a state average of 4.3%. The state reported per pupil expenditure rates were \$432 below and \$31 above the state average of \$5,492 in 1999. The study setting provided participants from two distinct high school settings. The school populations were 80% and 96% Caucasian. One school had a minority population that was 12% African American, 6% Asian and 2% Hispanic, while the second school's largest minority population was African American (2%). Both schools retain a reputation of focusing on preparing students for college. For instance, in 1997 one school ranked 4th (1047) in the state on the Scholastic Achieve-

ment Test (SAT) and the other was above the state average (986 versus 978), but below the national average of 1016.

Participants

One hundred and fourteen participants with LD from the 1997-98 school year composed the sample. This sample represented over 92% of all youth identified as LD who were in the participating schools. Non-participants were ill on the days of the interviews, unavailable because of schedule conflicts, or dropped out of school before they could be interviewed. Three available youth declined to participate. Table 1 provides demographic information for the participants.

Development of the Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was field tested with four high school teachers and four special education graduate students. These reviewers identified potentially problematic questions (e.g., items that were too general) and offered recommendations. The resulting protocol then was used with samples of 11 and 24 youth in neighboring high schools. These interviews provided the

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chance to further screen questions. One additional change involved the question that sought general recommendations to improve schools. When asked in this format, the question yielded few responses. It was necessary to reword the question to include specific prompts. These prompts included requests for recommendations for the curriculum, teachers, administration, school activities, and other. Furthermore, it was necessary to develop a standard definition of curriculum, which we described as a

Table 1
Demographics of Participants (N=114)

VARIABLE	x	SD
Intelligence:	Full-Scale IQ Score	91.6 (16.3)
	Verbal IQ Score	89.0 (16.8)
	Performance IQ Score	92.8 (17.3)
Achievement: ^a	Reading Composite Score	82.5 (17.4)
	Math Composite Score	84.2 (13.2)
	Written Language Composite Score	76.7 (13.1)
	<i>n</i>	(%)
Ever Repeated a Grade	60	(53%)
Ever Suspended From School	52	(46%)
Percent in Regular Education Full-Time ^b	40	(35%)
Percent Eligible for Free Lunch at School	32	(28%)
Percent Living with Two Parents	76	(66%)
Race (% White)	97	(85%)
Gender (% Male)	91	(80%)
Father with High School Diploma	68	(60%)
Father with one or more years of College	31	(27%)
Mother with High School Diploma	90	(79%)
Mother with one or more years of College	46	(40%)

Note: ^aBased on the respective composite scores for the Woodcock Johnson Test of Educational Achievement Revised or Weschler Individual Achievement Test.

^bReflects programming status for their current year, remaining youth in resource programming.

student's classes and textbooks. Another question (i.e., how a teacher had helped youth) proved confusing for some youth, so we asked for an example of something that a high school teacher had done that helped them to learn.

Data Collection

Participants in this study received information and informed consent forms in January of

1998. The information included an overview of the study, its rationale, and the offer of one dollar for about fifteen minutes of their time. Each participant received assurances of confidentiality through special codes and verbal guarantees of privacy, the right to not answer particular questions, and the right to end the interview at any time.

The use of individual interviews reflects a belief that it of-

fers inherent advantages, including higher response rates and increased honesty (Kidder & Judd, 1986). Individual interviews also offered potential disadvantages, including the need for interviewer expertise, concerns for participant reactivity, and the potential effect of social acquiescence. The following responses represented attempts to offset these potential disadvantages. Both authors of this article, trained special educators with advanced degrees in psychology and special education, conducted the interviews. In addition, the participants were familiar with the interviewers due to our routine work in these schools. This familiarity should reduce participant reactivity and social acquiescence. Furthermore, the interviews took place during regular school hours and in a separate office or an empty classroom. The interview setting provided a comfortable place that was free from teacher or peer influence, and distractions.

The format used a standard set of questions and prompts across all interviews. The interviewers, during the interview, transcribed all responses word for word. The tape recording of nine (8%) of the interviews provided an assessment of the data collection system's reliability. We asked fourteen students for their consent to have the interview taped and nine agreed. These recordings involved a minicassette recorder placed between the interviewer and the interviewee. A graduate student provided an independent transcription by listening to the taped versions and recording the responses. A second graduate student compared the two independent transcriptions (taped and original interview). This comparison included a word by word (for open-ended items) or response by response (for closed-ended responses) analy-

sis. The agreement across the open-ended responses was 95% (367 of a possible 385 word pairs were identical). Examples of errors included missing words (e.g., “around,” “with,” “good,” “one time”) and different terms with similar meanings (e.g., “be mean” vs. “get on your nerves,” “those people” vs. “they”). None of the errors appeared to change the meaning of any responses. The closed-ended responses had a 98% rate of agreement (237 of 239 items were identical). Examples of closed-ended responses include the basic demographic questions.

Results

Data Presentation and Interpretation

The responses reviewed for this study came from six specific questions. Participants initially responded to perceived advantages and disadvantages of stay-

ing in school. The next two questions asked for the best and worst parts of school. The fourth question asked for an example of how a teacher had really helped them to learn. This example could come from their current or past school years. Participants, for the fifth question, offered changes that would help them to stay in and complete school. Individual prompts requesting school, family, and personal changes followed this question. Finally, participants responded whether they had any general recommendations for how their school could keep peers from dropping out. The general recommendation question included specific prompts for changes involving teachers, administrators, school curricula, school activities, and other ideas.

The following procedures helped to interpret the resulting data. Once recorded, all re-

sponses were in tabular form with separate notation for the participants in regular education full time and youth being female. We constructed open categories to help interpret consistent and prominent perceptions (Strauss & Corbin, 2000). Occasionally there was overlap between categories when an individual response would fit into two categories. Such comments were identified as doublets and are in the respective notes to the tables. We also noted possible trends for youth in regular education fulltime versus those in resource programming, and males versus females. Possible trends, while respecting the limited sample size and statistical power, were percentage deviations that exceeded the overall average by 15% or more. Only two such trends emerged (females reported socializing as less important than males, and males accounting for all of re-

Table 2
Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages to Staying in School

CATEGORY (N OR %)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
	Perceived Advantages (98 or 86%)
Better Job (56 or 49%)	Get a better job ^a ; Better job ^b ; Well, I can get a job easier; Get a good job, don't have to work in a fast-food restaurant; Getting a better job; More likely to get a better job; You can get a better job
Better Education (29 or 24%)	Get a good education; Get an education; Knowledge; Learn more; Getting a better education
Getting a Diploma (4 or 4%)	Getting a diploma; You can get a diploma
	Perceived Disadvantages (40 or 35%)
Less Money (12 or 30%)	Stay broke all the time; Can't get a full-time job; Can't get a job
Less Free Time (13 or 33%)	Miss the best part of the day; Less free time; I don't get to do some things
Educators (7 or 18%)	Teachers get on your nerves; Putting up with teachers

Note: ^a16 students had this exact quote
^b7 students had this exact quote

Table 3
Best and Worst Parts of School

CATEGORY (N OR %)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
	Best Part of School (108 or 95%)
Socializing (54 or 50%)	Seeing friends ^a ; Seeing all my friends; Lunch, you get to eat and see friends; Being with friends; Get to see friends; My friends
Particular Class (47 or 44%)	ROTC ^b ; Art and PE because you don't have to work hard; Math, I'm good at it; Vocational courses, I learn more; Auto Mechanics; Drama class and friends; Biology, I like Biology; English
	Worst Part of School (100 or 88%)
Particular Class (32 or 32%)	Math is hard; Math, I can't do it; Social Studies is boring; English is boring; All the reading; English is hard
Schoolwork (21 or 21%)	The homework is too much; Homework makes you lose your free time ^c ; The schoolwork is too hard; Classes you have to listen and take notes
Administrators/Teachers (17 or 17%)	Teachers are buttheads; Ms. X doesn't like me; Teachers who intimidate you ^c ; Some administrators are inconsiderate
Getting Up (16 or 16%)	Getting up in the morning ^c ; The hours too early
Note: ^a 17 youth said this exact quote ^b Six youth said this quote ^c Two youth said this quote	

quests for changing school rules), and it can be assumed that percentage differences between service setting and gender were small. Additional subgroups, were too small in number to warrant additional comparisons (e.g., the largest minority subgroup was seven African American participants).

Data Credibility

A set of ten high school teachers, six graduate students, and two special education directors verified the constructed categories in that they reported no disagreements with them or their supporting quotes. This process helped us to have an independent and objective process for deriving meaning from such a large number of quotes, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (2000) and Patton (2002).

The data reduction, in the form of derived categories, allowed us to feel comfortable that we had captured the gist of the respective response sets (see Tables 2 through 5). The constructed categories accounted for the vast majority of responses, with others categorized as miscellaneous (thus left off the tables).

A second concern involved how best to provide the reader with as much information as possible within the confines of a tabular format. We decided to respond to this by placing every fifth comment in the corresponding table. For example, a question or prompt that generated 20 responses would be represented by 4 specific quotes (5th, 10th, 15th, and 20th). The exception involved duplicate quotes where we report one representative quotation and foot-

note the fact that additional youth had this exact comment.

Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Staying in School

Participants identified perceived advantages and disadvantages with staying in school (see Table 2). Most of the participants reported that school related to some aspect of their personal development. Their personal development included the chance to get a better job, a better education, or a diploma. Perceived disadvantages, while reported by few participants, focused attention to the inability to make money, reduced freedom, or having to get up in the morning.

Best and Worst Parts of School

Table 3 shows that nearly all of the participants offered re-

Table 4
Examples of How A Teacher Really Helped Individual Youth to Learn (111 or 97%)

CATEGORY (N OR %)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Instructional Support (25 or 32%)	Like having teachers that don't just teach but present it to you in a different way so it's easier to learn; They sit there and explain things to me bit by bit; Teacher worked with me when I was struggling; Le me some slack on my grade; Teacher helped you do everything, stops what she's doing to help you
Special Assistance (32 or 29%)	Having someone helping me; Sat down with me instead of just preaching to me; Worked with me; Helped me work out problems
Teaching Style (21 or 19%)	Showing us with hands-on activities; Discussion in class; Made classes easier and more fun; Putting things in simpler form while sitting with you
Individual Help (17 or 15%)	One-on-one help; Helped me individually; Worked with me one-on-one

sponses as to the best and worst parts of school. The best part of school tended to be socializing with peers or being in a particular class. Socializing included simply being with or getting to see friends, and spending time with them at lunch. Participants reporting a particular class as the best part of school focused on classes that allowed them to be actively involved in some way, and ones which appeared relevant or where they perceived being successful. The response pattern among females showed a slightly different, though not statistically significant, response pattern (32% for social, 59% for a particular class). This trend suggests that females may be less likely to see socializing as the best part of school.

The worst part of school drew attention to a certain class, the schoolwork, educators, or having to get up too early. Participants described specific classes and schoolwork in terms of being boring or too difficult. They viewed educators, on the other hand, as difficult to get along with.

Examples of How a Teacher Really Helped Individual Youth to Learn

Table 4 shows examples of how a teacher had responses helped individuals to learn. Nearly all the responses fell into one of four categories. First, most responses related to a teacher's special assistance. The comments show that participants remembered teachers who had gone out of their way to help, support, or encourage the student in some way. Second, and related to the first, participants reported how a teacher's special assistance had proved essential in the context of learning. Special assistance involved individual help or unique support in some way. Third, a teacher's style of teaching left a mark, especially when a teacher made learning enjoyable in some way. Finally, a separate category referred to as individual help emerged. This category reflected an appreciation for teachers who had worked individually with selected participants.

Specific and General Changes for Helping Youth to Complete School

Most participants provided suggestions for specific personal, school, and family changes that would help them to stay in and complete school (see Table 5). These recommended school changes drew attention to school rules, teaching styles, and the need for more assistance. The rule changes ranged from the tardy policy to the establishment of smoking areas. Requests for changes in the style of teaching reflected a desire to have access to more individual help, as did the calls for more assistance in general, and favorable relationships with teachers. A possible trend involved the feature that males accounted for all of the 21 suggestions for changing school rules. This pattern implies that males have more difficulty conforming to the high school setting, or are more likely to vocalize their dissatisfaction with established school rules. Family changes, while coming from only a minority of participants, reit-

Table 5
Changes to Help Youth Stay in and Complete School

CATEGORY (N OR %)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
	School Changes (63 or 55%)
Change Rules (21 or 33%)	Be easier on the rules; Put smoking area in, let us wear hats, and get rid of tardy policy; Do something about the tardy rules
Teaching Style (19 or 30%)	Have programs where teachers work one-on-one with students; Teachers help more individually; Treat me like an adult
More Assistance (7 or 11%)	Try to help me more in subject that were difficult
	Family Changes (35 or 31%)
More Assistance (20 or 57%)	They could praise you for what you do right; Keep helping me; Get me to school; Teach me well; Stand behing me and help me
Work Harder (37 or 52%)	Work hard; Work harder; Do my work more; I could keep telling myself to do it; Keep trying; Keep grades up; Try harder
Change Attitude (34 or 48%)	Keep my mind focused; Stop being crazy; Keep a positive attitude; Have to want to stay in, cannot be made to; Believe in myself and do it

erated a desire for more assistance, emotional support, or praise for academic accomplishments. Finally, most participants also offered changes they could make. These personal changes showed that many participants felt they should work harder or change their attitude at school.

In terms of general changes for improving school, a large majority (35 of whom offered two or more comments) of participants provided a total 121 responses (see Table 6). Recommended general changes for teachers yielded three categories: having a better attitude, better teaching, and offering more help. The comments demonstrate that most participants encouraged teachers to improve student-teacher relationships, enjoy teaching, and offer more help. The recommended curriculum changes included improving textbooks, while administrators were encouraged to improve

their relationships with students. Finally, some of the participants felt the schools could offer more extracurricular activities.

Discussion

This study examined how a sample of youth with LD perceived key aspects of their high school programs. A discussion of the results should be tempered with a consideration of some of this study's limitations. First, we report findings from only two high school samples of participants with LD. Furthermore, these samples included only a small minority population and were 9th graders. Second, the use of a structured interview, while offering inherent advantages, limited the participants' range of responses, which limited the resulting breadth of information. Third, we opted to use a brief interview format. This decision reflected our desire to establish preliminary information that would inform and jus-

tify future research designs that might explore youth perceptions of high school. With these limitations in mind, the findings offer an intriguing approach toward helping developing a shared understanding of what might make for a more meaningful secondary special education program. The responses of participants, in combination, provide one option for conceptualizing how vocational special educators might deploy more effective interventions and services at the high school level. Specifically, the comments and corresponding categories generate insight for deploying interventions to better help youth to respond to the challenges associated with their learning disability and program characteristics that will improve their satisfaction with services.

Youth Perceptions of Learning Disabilities

Many participants supported the concept of self-determina-

tion as it related to the apparent problems they associated with their LD. For instance, a large proportion reported that they should work harder at school or improve their attitude in some way, outcomes that appear critical for their success in high school. We acknowledge that such comments might simply have been a function of social acquiescence where someone reports what they think you wish to hear, but felt confident that the youth were being frank and honest. Assuming the comments were genuine, it becomes intriguing to consider how their concerns seem to mesh with self-determination. The goal of self-determination, a popular curricular innovation, is to empower youth to influence the type of program they experience (Field, 1996; Ward, 1996; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). In this

study, one such influence appears that youth may be self-determined to improve their work habits and attitude at school. It appears that they perceive their LD as problematic in these areas, or at least perceive these outcomes as a way to compensate. It seems logical that proposed individual educational programs (IEPs) offer such an opportunity and allow them to define more specific goals that allow them to deal with perceived weaknesses. Interventions that might support such an ambition include formal training in self-management strategies, homework completion, and learning strategy instruction to help youth become more independent (Vallecorsa, deBettencourt, & Zigmond, 1999) and participation in a self-determination curriculum (see Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, &

Wehmeyer, 1998; Field & Hoffman, 1996; Halpern, Herr, Wolf, Doren, Johnson, & Lawson, 1999).

Youth Perceptions of Secondary Special Education Services

The initial perception is that participants reported the most important advantage of high school is that it prepares them for their life after high school. This preparation, in their words, included providing them with the skills necessary to get a better job, enter college, or simply to be graduated. They want a high school education that includes vocational preparation. It seems only reasonable that we utilize this motivation and offer services that are convincing in the sense that youth see the connection between what they do in school and success in future careers. Specific interven-

Table 6
Changes for Improving School (86 or 74% responding)

CATEGORY (N OR %)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
	Changes for Teachers (69 or 61%)
Better Attitude (30 or 43%)	Be more fun and not so much by the book; Some teachers could spend more time with students; Could have cared more about what we learned, not just grades; Be nicer, more helpful
Better Teaching (25 or 36%)	Make classes more interesting, more hands-on stuff; Some could teach better; Teachers are too strict and think of teaching as just a job; Should not just teach out of the book and use some fun stuff
Offer More Help (10 or 15%)	More one-on-one teaching; Help me more
	Curriculum Changes (19 or 17%)
Better Texts (12 or 63%)	Textbooks in better condition; Buy new books
Easier Texts (7 or 37%)	Make them easier to read
	Changes for Administration (17 or 15%)
Better relationships (13 or 77%)	Sometime they overreact; Stop being so cruel
	Changes in School Activities(18 or 16%)
More Activities (12 or 69%)	The school could be more into clubs; Chess club

tions to consider include formal and information vocational assessments that help link their schooling to their postschool plans, assistance in finding suitable summer or weekend employment in fields that match their interests and skills, and activities that provide an explicit link between postschool outcomes and high school courses.

The need for more positive, personal contacts with educa-

Youth with LD want, and deserve access to, professionals who value their students' welfare, provide individual attention, and help them to learn or enjoy school.

tors was a dominant theme in this study. This theme emerged relative to what youth perceived as the worst part of school, changes to help youth stay in and complete school, and changes to improve school. This theme also seemed to be a central feature of the examples of how a teacher had really helped individual youth to learn. The idea that positive student and teacher relationships are a crucial component of effective secondary programs should not be surprising. G. Stanley Hall (1963), in one of the first large-scale investigations of the perceptions of youth, demonstrated that youth wanted access to caring educators. Other studies have consistently supported findings of Hall, especially among youth deemed at-risk of failure in school (Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Finn, 1989; Kortering & Braziel, 1998; Tidwell, 1988; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). These interviews led us to conclude that positive, personal contacts between teachers and youth, at the high school level, are the essential component of any program that tries to keep youth in school until

graduation. Youth with LD want, and deserve access to, professionals who value their students' welfare, provide individual attention, and help them to learn or enjoy school.

The idea that programs also should strive to help more youth to enjoy school, while intuitively appealing, may prove somewhat challenging. On the one hand, participants consistently reported that socializing with peers was the best part of school. This finding, while not surprising, supports research that shows socializing to be a primary motivation in high school settings (Kortering, Konold, & Glutting, 1999). A logical response would be to expand the use of interventions that incorporate cooperative learning (Goodwin, 1999; Reick & Dugger-Wadsworth, 1999; Robitschek, 1996), service learning activities, and involvement in extracurricular school activities (Edar & Kinny, 1995; Finn, 1989; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). They also seemed to enjoy teachers who went out of their way to support their learning and offer classes with active learning (i.e., classes like Reserve Officer Training Cadet ROTC, art, or physical education, vocational classes). On the other hand, the structure of the traditional high school often restricts the deployment of interventions tailored to helping students to enjoy school. The public schools also seem to rely on salary and related reward systems that fall short of commending teachers who provide experiences that help students to enjoy school. We feel that high school settings need to incorporate meaningful feedback from their students as suggested by Goodlad's classic study (1984) and pay attention to whether students enjoy school (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

The need for support services that helped participants to

succeed also emerged as a key theme for effective programs. Specifically, participants expressed appreciation for teachers who helped youth to learn or be successful in some way, provided special assistance or individual help, or taught in such a way as to make learning enjoyable. Also, participants reported that their success could be enhanced by more individual support from educators, teachers having a better attitude toward youth, and better teaching in general. Other studies have referenced the need to address similar concerns (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998; Wehlage, et al., 1989). The feature that research findings align with the views of youth consumers further compels action on deploying interventions that prove effective at helping youth succeed in school and life. The need for such interventions is nothing new (see e.g., Dunn, 1968). What may be new is the suggestion that such interventions reflect the perceptions of youth, rather than just what educators feel, in terms of what is useful and essential for their academic success.

Finally, the intent of this study is to help educators close the gap between the perceived needs of their students and what their existing programs actually offer. The key to this ambition hinges upon a reconsideration of the role youth should have in their educational program. Considerable effort, from a legal standpoint, has been placed on maintaining the individual student as the focus of interventions. Concepts like IEPs, appropriate public education, and tailoring programs to the unique needs of individual students are legal attempts to ensure that the student and their unique needs remain at the center of proposed interventions. Programs that adhere to these concepts, at le-

ast on a legalistic level, continue to thrive in the sense of experiencing increased funding (Chambers, Parris, & Harr, 2002; Rothstein & Miles, 1997) and being offered to increasing numbers of students (Office of Special Education, 1999). Aside from such successes, existing programs appear to be failing at what may be most important—providing a meaningful educational program that leads to graduation and a successful transition to a productive adulthood. It may be possible that many of the existing programs offer youth services that are not consistent with what they need and want. It seems a proper time to revisit the notions of student-centered planning and individualized programming. Specifically, vocational special educators must help schools to focus on incorporating interventions that actually respond to the needs of the youth themselves. Such an ambition begins with the ability to understand the school experiences of the youth we are serving.

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Dr. Larry Korterger is an Associate Professor in the Department of Language, Reading and Exceptionalities at Appalachian State University. Patricia M. Braziel is a Project Coordinator for the Improving Student Performance in Core Subject Classes. Address correspondence regarding this manuscript to Dr. Larry Korterger or Patricia Braziel, Appalachian State University, Edwin Duncan Hall, Boone, NC 28608.