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**Group of National Experts on Special Needs Education**

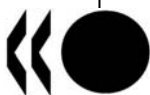
**CASE STUDIES: LEAD PROGRAM  
NATIONAL SECONDARY TRANSITION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER**

*This document describes case studies implemented by countries participating in the project "Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment". Each Case Study Report is published under the responsibility of the country that has prepared it and the views expressed in this document remain those of the country author(s) and not necessarily those of the OECD or its member countries.*

*The Group of National Experts on Special Needs Education last met in 2008. However, the remaining outputs of the project "Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment" continue to be given this reference to maintain coherence to previous material produced by the Group.*

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**Pathways for Students with Disabilities to Tertiary Education and Employment**

Includes Two Case Studies from the LEAD Program

1. From Secondary Education to Tertiary Education
2. From Secondary Education to Tertiary Education to Employment

Prepared by:

National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center

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## **Pathways for Students with Disabilities to Tertiary Education and Employment**

This report contains findings from two case studies of students who participated in Learning and Education about Disabilities (LEAD; [www.leadcolorado.org/](http://www.leadcolorado.org/)). LEAD is a nationally recognized self-advocacy program for college-bound high school students with learning disabilities. For example, a description of the program has been published in *Intervention in School and Clinic* (Poccock et al., 2002), students in the program have been invited to present at national conferences (e.g., the International Dyslexia Association conference, the Learning Disability Association of America conference and the National Dyslexic Association conference, etc.) and LEAD was recognized as a model self-determination program by the federally funded self-determination technical assistance center project (Self Determination Technical Assistance Center, 2010).

LEAD began in 1992 as a small support group for students with learning disabilities. LEAD was started by the high school guidance counselor as a result of students and parents who reported that accommodations were not being provided in general education classes. Additionally, the counselor had noticed that students were missing essential self-determination skills such as self and disability awareness. Since then, the group has grown from four students in the first year to 26 students currently, has become a credit earning course, and has shifted leadership from the school guidance counselor to a special education teacher.

LEAD is based on the philosophy of student leadership and ownership. The program is organized into two courses: one introductory and one advanced. Students typically enter the introductory course their second or third year of high school after completing a studies strategy course the high school offers to all students. Once students complete the introductory course, they enroll in the advanced course and remain in the advanced course until they graduate from high school. As students progress through the two courses, they start to gain a deeper understanding of their disability and the implications it has for them in school, college, and the workplace.

Because the goal of LEAD is to prepare students for life after high school, which includes attending college for almost every student in the program, LEAD provides specific supports (see LEAD Components) so that students are ready to make the transition from high school to college. The LEAD teacher discusses the topic of college daily in the advanced course and students are encouraged to start identifying schools and have choices of places they want to apply by their senior year. As part of the advanced course, students are given assistance with the college application process as needed. LEAD students are visited by former graduates who return to share stories about their college experiences, allowing LEAD students to hear personal stories of their friends who have transitioned successfully. The school staff systematically fades accommodations that would not be offered in college (e.g., a reader for exams) and instead encourages students to rely on more common supports (e.g., a technologically-based reader). Because college students are not automatically given accommodations at the college level, school staff members help students learn how to request accommodations through disability support services at a college university. In addition, LEAD has established relationships with colleges and universities with

disability support service programs that have successfully supported students with disabilities. Once students have applied to college, the teacher will often call the disability support service contact person and ensure that the school is a good match with the LEAD student.

LEAD is based on the concepts of self-determination and self-advocacy. Research has demonstrated that students with disabilities who have self-determination skills have improved post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). In addition, Test et al. (2009) systematically reviewed high quality correlational research to identify in-school predictors of post-school success. Self-determination skills were determined to have a potential level of evidence for predicting better post-school outcomes for education and employment. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) defined self-determination as:

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals' have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (p. 2)

Self determination includes several components, including self-advocacy (Wehmeyer, 1999). In a literature review on self-advocacy, Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005) established the conceptual framework for self-advocacy which included knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. LEAD reflects each of these four components as students learn about themselves and their disability, as well as disability rights through the education and support components of the program. Further, they develop communication and leadership skills through the community outreach and mentoring components.

### **LEAD Components**

LEAD is a credit class that organized into four basic components: education, mentoring, community outreach, and support. Students in LEAD are divided into two classes: an introductory class for students who are in their second and third year of high school and an advanced class for students who are in their third and fourth year of high school. Students are not eligible for the LEAD program their first year of high school due to all first year high school students being required to take a study skills course. Students must apply for entry into the advanced level; approximately 95% of students are admitted. If the teacher feels the students would benefit from the introductory information, that student would be enrolled in an additional year in the introductory level. Both the introductory and advanced classes meet separately, one class period per day. Students in the introductory course spend three days per week on the education component and two days per week in support. Students in the introductory course do not participate in the mentoring component. Students in the advanced course receive education two days per week, mentor for one day, and are also in support for two days. Both groups prepare any upcoming presentations during their education time.

**Education.** Education is organized by the two student courses. Students in the introductory course receive three days of education while the advanced course receives two days. Education days consist of a flexible curriculum based on current research in the field of learning disabilities. The intent of education days is to provide students with an overview of how their disability affects them educationally and socially in order to be able to effectively self-advocate. Students leave the program with an in-depth understanding of their strengths and needs and ways to compensate and advocate for needed classroom accommodations or workplace supports. Topics included in the course syllabus are physiology of the brain, disability diagnosis and assessments, disability specific information for learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression and anxiety, and advocacy. The LEAD teacher spends two to three hours per week reading research in the field of education. He then uses this information to teach students the most current research-based information on learning disabilities. Students use their own Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and assessment reports throughout the course to be able to connect the topics with themselves. The teacher provides students with self-advocacy skill instruction and leads group work to brainstorm and then role play application of self-advocacy skills to their own lives. Finally, students in the first year of the LEAD program have the option of being accompanied by an older student when applying these skills for the first time when they request accommodations in their general education classes.

**Mentoring.** The second component of LEAD is mentoring. Students in the advanced course develop relationships with students from local elementary schools who have learning disabilities. The elementary students are assigned a LEAD mentor who assists them in their classroom for 30 minutes a day, one day a week. The purpose of the mentoring component is to provide (a) LEAD students with additional opportunities to further develop and practice leadership skills and, (b) elementary students with positive role models who also have learning disabilities. Initially, students in LEAD helped identify strategies for developing a rapport with the students and now typically utilize a “big sibling” approach. LEAD students often develop relationships with the elementary students through the context of helping in the classroom but continually emphasize ways to overcome the stigma of having a learning disability. Often conversations will take place between the mentor and mentee regarding how to manage the embarrassment they may feel about having a learning disability.

**Community Outreach.** The third component of LEAD is community outreach. LEAD places a strong emphasis on educating the public about learning disabilities, advocacy, and accommodations. Students in LEAD develop presentations to share at national, state, and local levels and typically set aside time during the education component of their LEAD courses to prepare for this. Examples of national presentations have included the International Dyslexia Association conference, the Learning Disability Association of America conference and the National Dyslexic Association conference. Students have also presented at the state level including the Special Education Paraprofessionals state conference and the Courage to Risk conference (a conference dedicated to providing education and resources for local organizations). Audiences range from teachers and counselors, pre-service teachers at universities, families, and other students. Students in LEAD work together as a group to develop presentations that are specifically tailored to their audience. Students generally prepare personal testimonies of what it is like

living with a learning disability and typically provide time for a question and answer session. Presentations also provide opportunities for students to refine their speaking and advocacy skills. Following a presentation, students will typically review a video of their talk and critique themselves and their classmates.

**Support.** The fourth component of LEAD is support. Students in both courses spend two days per week, in group sessions. Although the teacher is present for group time, he typically acts as another member of the group and a student leader facilitates the sessions. This student leader is responsible for ensuring students are respectful and follow pre-determined guidelines including keeping all information confidential. Students view these sessions as a safe space and will often discuss issues surrounding school, or any issue that they are currently facing. Topics have included substance abuse, sibling rivalry, and communicating with parents. The group provides a supportive environment that instills a sense of accountability for students. Often students will be confronted for behaviors their peers are concerned with such as hiding their disability or explaining their poor performance by using their disability as an excuse.

### **LEAD Outcomes**

The LEAD program has shown positive outcomes for its students. Since the graduating class of 1998, 80 of the 84 graduates have been admitted to post-secondary (tertiary) education. Of those 80 students, 46 students are still enrolled, 11 have discontinued their participation in post-secondary school, and 23 have graduated. Of the 23 students who have graduated, two have earned their master's degrees, and one is in the process of applying to law school. Examples of positions held by former students include teacher, event planner, loan officer, financial advisor, non-profit worker, nurse, military officer, and architect.

These data are impressive since nationally, students with disabilities consistently have poor post-school outcomes when compared with their peers without disabilities. Recent data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009) indicate youth with disabilities continue to have poor post-school outcomes when compared with their peers without disabilities. Results indicated that students across disability categories had poor employment outcomes including lower rates of employment. Individuals with disabilities were employed at a rate of 56.8% while individuals without disabilities were employed at a rate of 66.4%. Additionally, individuals with disabilities typically experience lower wages. Those with disabilities earned an average of \$8.20 per hour while those without disabilities earned an average of \$9.20 per hour. Fewer individuals with disabilities attended college, and those who did, were less likely than their peers to attend a four-year institution. Specifically, 44.7% of students with learning disabilities have attended some type of post-secondary institution while 53% of individuals without disabilities attend some post-secondary institution (National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, 2007).

## Method

This case study was conducted through interviews with students, family members, and other related stakeholders. The description of LEAD was gathered through a review of documents including (a) published article (Pocock et al., 2002) and (b) the LEAD website ([www.leadcolorado.org/](http://www.leadcolorado.org/)), and an interview with the LEAD teacher. Two former LEAD students were identified by the LEAD teacher: Jason, a student currently enrolled in college (tertiary education) and Mark, a student who had graduated from college and was currently employed (note, both names are pseudonyms). In addition to these students, other relevant stakeholders who could either speak about LEAD and/or the students' self-advocacy skills were interviewed including family members, employers, and disability support service staff. Interviews were conducted over the phone and interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes with the students and 15 to 45 minutes with stakeholders. Student interview questions included time spent in LEAD including their involvement and thoughts on each of the four program components and what they felt was the most significant impact of LEAD. Students were also asked about their experiences with their transition from high school to college including (a) how they chose their school, (b) if and how much LEAD influenced this decision, and (c) their enrollment with disability support services. Questions were then asked about students' experiences in college, specifically regarding self-advocacy and requesting accommodations. Finally, questions for the student who was currently working (Mark) included their experience with self-advocacy skills needed in the workplace.

Questions for related stakeholders varied depending on their role. For example, family members were asked their overall impressions of LEAD and how LEAD prepared their son or daughter to transition to college. Questions for the employer focused on their impressions of student's self-advocacy skills in the workplace. Questions for the disability supports service staff member focused on their impressions of the student's ability to self-advocate and access services at the college level.

## Case study participants

The first case study examined the pathway from high school to college (secondary to tertiary education). Jason was a 22 year old male and a senior at a State university located in the western part of the United States. He had graduated from high school and LEAD in 2006. Other interviews were conducted with Jason's mother and a disability support services staff member at the university.

The second case study participant was Mark, a 27 year old male, who was employed at a law firm as a legal assistant and was in the process of applying to law school. Mark graduated from high school and LEAD in 2002. Additional interviews were conducted with Mark's father and his employer at the law firm.

## Results

Both students and their parents indicated that LEAD had a significant impact on their high school experiences. Findings indicated that the following LEAD components were critical to student success in high school: education, community outreach, and support. The mentoring component was not mentioned

by any of the stakeholders during the interview process. This section contains findings for each of these three components mentioned by participants during the interview process.

### **Education**

The education piece of LEAD was an essential component for both students' high school experience. When asked about what high school was like before LEAD, Jason's mother explained, "He would sit in the back of the class and not pay attention." In addition, Mark's father said that Mark's progress in school before joining LEAD was "spotty, he had poor grades and assignments were not getting done."

When asked about which components of the program were most important to them, both Mark and Jason replied that education was one of them. Mark said, "Education, this gave me the pieces to understand what was going on (with me) and be able to share it with others." The education piece of LEAD is designed to provide students with an understanding of how their learning disability affects them but also provides them with essential information they need to share with others to be able to self-advocate for themselves. As Jason noted "Also, I learned a great deal about learning disabilities in my four years with LEAD and that knowledge has made me more confident in myself and in the way I teach others about learning disabilities." Jason's mother referred to the moment her son learned that "the information goes in the brain but comes out differently" as a light bulb moment for her son where he shifted to becoming a more successful student.

The self-advocacy skills learned through LEAD, in general and practiced during the education sessions, were invaluable to students. Mark was able to take the skills he learned in class and apply them to his own experience as a student at both the secondary and tertiary levels and eventually as an employee. Mark advocated for himself as he advanced through the levels of English classes during high school. When asked how easy or difficult it was for Mark to obtain accommodations in college, Mark's father replied, "I'm not sure; isn't that how it's supposed to be?" Finally, as an employee in a law firm, Mark identified needed accommodations and also knew when presented with a task beyond his capabilities, to request help or suggest that someone else might be better suited for the task. In addition Mark's employer agreed that Mark knew what supports he needed including staying organized and that he seemed very comfortable asking for help when he needed it.

Jason also was able to take the skills learned through his experience with LEAD and use them in college. When compared to other students she has worked with at her university, the disability supports service case manager indicated that Jason "owned what he was good at and could compensate well for his needs." In addition, she described him as a "strong self-advocate."

### **Community Outreach**

The presentations the students gave during their time with LEAD also had an impact on them and their skills. Both Mark and Mark's father separately reported his first presentation as a pivotal event in his



high school career. Mark said, "I distinctly remember standing up in front of a group for the first time, introducing myself, and stating I had a disability." In addition, Mark's father remembered how he felt when hearing his son present for the first time: "It was like a weight lifted off my shoulders...he will make it...I knew I didn't have to be my child's advocate any longer." Mark's father indicated he regarded the presentations as the most visible, final culmination of the program.

### **Support**

The support group days were also critical to each student's success in high school. Jason's mother spoke of her son's experience with the support group: "The group days were the most valuable. They created a safe space for Jason and the other students to be able to share what was going on in their lives. Nothing that was shared was allowed to leave the room." When asked about his impressions of the support group, the LEAD group teacher remarked, "I wouldn't have believed high school students could communicate that deeply."

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this report was to provide findings from two case studies of students who participated in LEAD and had made either the transition from high school to college or the transition from high school to college and employment. Both students indicated that LEAD was effective in providing support during high school, as well as with the necessary self-advocacy skills to be successful in college. In addition, LEAD also prepared Mark to be able to self-advocate and identify needed supports at his place of employment after graduating from college.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Additional research may be warranted regarding the usefulness of the mentoring components of the program. None of these participants indicated that this was an important component; however, the opportunity to provide supportive role models for younger students is a logical component of the program and its usefulness should be investigated.

The current report only provides information on the experiences of two students. Further research is needed to examine LEAD's efficacy by reviewing outcome data of program participants compared to peers who have not participated in a self-advocacy program. Because LEAD has only been fully implemented in one high school in one school district, future research should examine its outcomes (e.g., level of self-determination, college entry and completion, accessing disability services) in other settings including those of different socio-economic status or with students with other disabilities. Additional research might also extend LEAD, particularly the education, community outreach, and support components to younger students.

### **Implications for Policy**

To successfully replicate LEAD in other places, a number of policy issues must be addressed. First, school or district level policies must exist that allow for credit for the courses. Second, policies will need to allow students to travel to other schools for mentoring. Third, funds must be available to support travel to make local, state, and national presentations. Fourth, funds must be set aside for a full-time LEAD teacher. Finally, a mechanism is needed to allow information sharing between the high school and colleges and/or universities where LEAD students are applying and/or enrolling.

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