

# Contacting Hard-to-Find Youth: Strategies for the Post-School Survey

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Yearly, approximately 100,000 former students who had an individual education program (IEP) when they left high school are contacted to participate in a post-school survey. Efforts are made to contact youth who represent a variety of disabilities, as well as, minority youth and those who left high school with a diploma or dropped out of high school. Nevertheless, there are groups of youth who are difficult to contact and who are routinely underrepresented in the post-school survey data (e.g., those students who leave school early). To learn strategies for contacting youth who are hard-to-find, the National Post-School Outcomes Center conducted six focus groups with young adults and their family members in four states. This document summarizes the strategies recommended by youth and their families. Strategies are organized by five common themes.

**#1 Provide Pre-Notification** – inform students and families about the survey multiple times during the years leading up to the survey. Receiving pre-notification about the survey was more important to youth than the method used to contact them or conduct the survey.

- While students are still in high school:
  - Discuss the survey with students; explain the purpose; provide the questions; and define the timeline for conducting the survey;
  - Share survey results from former students; talk about the number of former students who enrolled in college or other postsecondary education or training opportunities, went to work, or enlisted in the service;
  - Include survey information (e.g., when it will occur, why youth were selected) with information about colleges, job fairs, and services available in their area;
  - Include survey information with other important information that is sent home to parents during the junior and senior years (e.g., information about class rings, senior portraits, and graduation videos);
  - Provide information about the survey at the final IEP meeting;
  - Establish and ask students to join a high school Facebook page to maintain contact with students;
  - Ask youth to identify the person from their school (e.g., favorite teacher, guidance counselor, coach) they would like to talk to a year after high school;
  - Ask youth who they would want to respond to the survey on their behalf if they cannot be reached.
- After students leave high school:
  - Use private messages on Facebook to verify contact information, remind students of the importance of the survey, and inform them of the timeline for completing the survey;

- Mail a personalized and signed letter explaining the survey process, in a hand addressed, white envelope 1 – 2 weeks prior to the survey; avoid generic form letters and windowed envelopes.

## **#2 Create Familiarity** - help students and families become familiar with the survey

- Explain to students that they are helping other students like themselves by answering the questions on the survey;
- Show students specific examples of how survey information was used to make school better;
- Share the survey with students (and families) so they know what questions will be asked and that the information being asked is legitimate, not a scam for personal information;
- Teach students the vocabulary of the survey;
- Practice completing the questionnaire or responding to the interview with the student;
- Identify the person who has a relationship with the hardest of the hard-to-find youth and ask that person to inform the youth of the survey and/or conduct the interview.

## **#3 Show Interest When Conducting the Survey** – be attentive to youth as individuals as they share their experiences

- Be enthusiastic when calling youth and families;
- Be interested in the answers youth provide;
- Convey a non-judgmental tone when talking with youth; don't show disappointment if the answers aren't what was expected or hoped for from specific youth;
- Read the interview with varied voice inflection so it isn't read in a monotone voice.

## **#4 Provide Incentives** – give former students a reason to participate in the survey; remember, not all incentives are monetary

- Remind students that the information they share will help other students with disabilities (and provide information to help improve school services);
- Provide information about jobs, colleges, and services student may be eligible;
- Give gift certificates from local restaurants and businesses, (donated by businesses) to the “hardest” of the hard to find youth;
- Provide modest, \$5, monetary incentives to the ‘hardest’ of the hard-to-find youth.

## **#5 Making Contact**

- Contact family members near significant dates when youth may have been in touch with family, (e.g., holidays, youth's birthday) to verify or update contact information;
- Maintain a list of family members still in school (e.g., cousins, siblings) who may know how to reach the former student;
- Vary who calls and leaves a message, for example, males/females, younger/older;
- Leave a message with a call back number so youth can distinguish the survey caller from telemarketers; most youth said they would return a call if they had a phone number;
- Use the school logo and name in any survey related materials, especially if sending information via email or through a website. Youth were suspicious of emails asking them to provide personal information or “click here” to take the survey.