Abstract. This article explores the relationship between the school-to-career transition research findings and current school reform initiatives. We identified three compilations of secondary transition-related research (i.e., Kohler, 1993; Hughes, Hwang, Kim, Killian, Jarmer, & Alcantara, 1997; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997) as sources documenting empirical trends within the field. To analyze the information these compilations provided, we grouped their results into four categories using a framework originally developed by Phelps and Wermuth (1992): (a) program administration, (b) curriculum and instruction, (c) support services, and (d) formalized articulation and communication categories. We compared this information to the reform policy and practices agenda to understand future challenges to the provision of transition services. We argue that secondary special educators should align their advocacy and research efforts within a “whole school reform” context as opposed to a “students with disabilities” context.

The narrow focus on academics promulgated in many reform efforts raises concerns about their potentially negative effect on the lives of students with disabilities (Halpern, 2000). Generally, the field of special education has not been a part of the educational reform discussions (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). An analysis of literature associated with popular reform efforts (e.g., content standards and high stakes testing) painted a dismal picture about the participation of students with disabilities and their families in educational restructuring efforts (Cobb, Lehmann, Tochtermann, & Bomotti, 2000). In light of the current public discourse relating to educational reforms and their subsequent implementation, it seems timely to re-examine the emergent school-to-career transition research agenda.

The interest in general education reforms is consistent with the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1997 mandates requiring student
participation in the general education curriculum and in large-scale assessments. Surveyed school-to-career transition professionals considered the most important research priorities for their field to include reconciling the ideology of inclusion with the practices of transition, and exploring linkages to educational reform initiatives (Bassett, Patton, White, Blalock, & Smith, 1997). According to Halpern (2000), the field of special education needs to align and coordinate the future transition research agenda with school reform efforts.

The need for transition services evolved from outcome studies that found students leaving high school experiencing marginalized futures (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). The school-to-career transition process emphasizes students' successful entry into adulthood. Through this process students receive applied and vocational curricula and experiences as part of their preparation for desired careers and independent living situations (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). Transition services are meant, then, to stem the tide of failure; to help students to become contributing adults (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

There are clearly gaps between the academically driven educational reform agenda and those practices related to the transition process (Cobb et al., 2000). This article explores the relationship between the school-to-career transition research findings and current school reform initiatives. Toward this end we reviewed research findings related to secondary school and promising transition practices, reviewed descriptions of educational reform initiatives, and compared the transition-related findings to components of educational reform. Through this process, we reviewed articles that represented research compilations and categorized empirically identified school-to-career transition practices found to improve the future success of students with disabilities. In this manuscript, we summarize the transition research reviews and then the educational reform descriptions. Subsequently, we compare the two and suggest strategies to align research efforts that result in mutually effective educational practices and promote the success of all students.

**TRANSITION-RELATED RESEARCH**

**Procedures**

To identify research themes, we searched the *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* and *Exceptional Children* journals and the National Transition Alliance (NTA) databases selecting articles that were compilations of research conducted over the last 15 years and used rigorous analytic procedures. Specifically, we wanted to locate research examining strategies and interventions associated with positive outcomes because IDEA of 1990
defined transition as an outcome-based activity. Positive outcomes refer to students' quality of life with respect to their productive engagement following high school in employment or post secondary education, in terms of financial and residential independence, and related to the development of positive social affiliations (Halpern, 1993). We identified three articles that met these criteria: Kohler (1993) reviewed 17 research studies to determine which transition-related practices were substantiated by data, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) synthesized research and evaluation studies that demonstrated programs' positive effects on student outcomes, and Hughes, Hwang, Kim, Killian, Jarmer, and Alcantara (1997) identified and validated transition-related support strategies through a process that included an integrative literature review and survey of researchers in the area of transition.

Analytic Framework

We used a framework designed by Phelps and Wermuth (1992) as our tool for analyzing the empirically based promising school-to-career transition practices reported in the articles. We selected this framework because it was developed through an extensive review of program effectiveness studies. Our purpose was to extend the knowledge base by including information from other reviews. We adapted the framework by omitting one category, occupational experience and placement, because we did not think it was germane to the discussion related to reform literature. The major categories included in our modified framework address overarching practices associated with creating competent environments and delivering effective pedagogy that lead to successful student outcomes (see Table 1). We sorted the strategies found in the research reviews and listed them beneath the category to which they were most closely related. The categories, briefly described below, include program administration, curriculum and instruction, support services, and formalized articulation and communication. According to Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997), "Such comprehensive frameworks, which examine broadly the variables and factors that could potentially influence student learning and post-school outcomes, are an essential beginning point for documenting the effects of practices on attainment of valued outcomes" (p. 209).

Review Synthesis

Program administration. Program administration greatly influences which school-to-career transition practices are implemented and the degree to which they are promoted. Only one of the reviews, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997), highlighted strategies in this area that appear to contribute to student success. According to Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell, program administrators' ability to lead is related to their understanding of and support for the appropriate placement of students with disabilities in inclusive
Table 1
Synthesis of Transition-Related Research Reviews: An Analytic Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Program Administration</th>
<th>Curriculum and Instruction</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Support Services</th>
<th>Formalized Articulation and Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hughes et al. (1997)</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Choice making and decision making&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Co-worker, peer, family and environment support&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Independence objectives identified&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Self-management and independence&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Student preferences and decision-making identification&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Social skills&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Support matched to student needs&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Social acceptance assessed and monitored&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kohler (1993)</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Vocational training&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Parent involvement&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Paid work&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Interagency collaboration and service delivery&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997)</td>
<td>&quot;Leadership&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Integration of vocational and academic curricula&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Career guidance and counseling&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Parent involvement&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>&quot;Resources&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Job placement&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Early notification of vocational opportunities&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Staff Development&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Assessment of interests and abilities&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Vocational and regular educator involvement in planning&quot;</td>
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<tr>
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<td>&quot;Work experience opportunities&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Interagency collaboration&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Cooperative education&quot;</td>
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academic and vocational settings. Leaders must facilitate opportunities for collaboration between faculty to meet the needs of all students and to be able to integrate academic and vocational subjects. In addition, leaders must be willing to budget and spend adequate amounts of money to support students with special needs. In other words, facilitating the learning of these students must be a priority with leaders if positive outcomes are going to occur for these students. Leaders also must support professional development addressing accommodating students with special needs in their instruction, and implementing various programmatic aspects of transition including assessment, evaluation, referral, and job placement.

Curriculum and instruction. In our review, we identified nine strategies within the broad heading of curriculum and instruction that were found to be important to positive student outcomes. Curriculum and instruction
refers primarily to the interrelationships between the types of classes in which students enroll and the types of curricula they receive. For example, Kohler (1993) and Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) found supporting evidence regarding the benefits of vocational education. Additionally, Kohler and Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell mentioned studies highlighting the importance of community-based work experiences that often occur as the result of cooperative education programs. Because students must typically choose between vocational and academic education, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell argued that the integration of academic concepts into vocational education courses was critically important to the long-term success of students.

Kohler (1993) and Hughes et al. (1997) cited research emphasizing the role of social skills in helping students achieve outcomes. Hughes et al. (1997) defined social skills as "social behaviors that facilitate interactions" (p. 5). Hughes et al. also identified research supporting the need to teach skills such as functional household tasks but extended the concept of independence to include skills associated with self-determination, such as how to make choices and decision-making.

In a larger sense the terms "curriculum and instruction" in reference to student placement in regular education (i.e., inclusive) settings is nominally and indirectly addressed by all of these researchers. For example, Hughes et al. (1997) used the concept of integrated settings as one criterion for selecting research articles in their validation of transition support strategies.

Support services. Support services are those services provided by schools that are not generally part of curriculum or instruction. Specific strategies included in this domain range from support provided directly to students, such as career counseling and supports that increase the competence or accessibility of environments. Most prevalent in discussions about support was the need to inextricably link supports to students' needs.

The use of assessment strategies to facilitate vocational planning is emphasized in the research. For example, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell’s (1997) research analyses attributed vocational assessment, career guidance activities, and job placement with successful outcomes. They highlighted the use of one particular assessment strategy, the informal assessment strategy called "ecological assessment," whereby individuals' strengths and weaknesses are compared to the environmental (e.g., job or classroom) requirements for successful functioning. In terms of career guidance and job placement, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell noted the importance of students receiving specific information about potential work, followed by assistance in obtaining the jobs.

Hughes, et al. (1997) concurred with Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) relative to the importance of career-related student assessment. According to Hughes et al., empirical evidence showed the benefits of assessing student
interests and choices for the express purpose of identifying students' decision-making skills. Like Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell, these researchers found informal and ecological approaches to assessment to be the most empirically sound. Their description of how to assess workplace independence, for example, stated, "Survey the student's environments (i.e., home, community, school, work) through observation and by interviewing the student and significant others and to identify the areas in which the student's performance is not consistent with expectations" (p. 5). The Hughes et al. (1997) and Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) studies suggested that assessment is an ongoing, dynamic process, rather than a singular measurement. For example, according to Hughes et al., monitoring students' social appropriateness occurs over time and across settings.

Formalized articulation and communication. This category refers to the people and agencies that must join together in their efforts to promote students' pursuit of successful outcomes during the transition from school to post-school activity. The process of formal transition planning is highlighted here because it is the formal mechanism for communicating activities that must be accomplished and for bringing various parties together in order to decide upon and articulate those activities. Collaborative planning depends upon communication between parents of students, adult service agencies, and teachers. In over half of the research and follow-up studies Kohler (1993) reviewed, interagency collaboration and parental involvement were associated with positive student outcomes. Additionally, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) cited research supporting the need for vocational and academic teachers to collaborate with each other because that collaboration increased the likelihood that formalized transitional plans were implemented. Specifically, the manner in which students' goals were developed affects the content and the buy-in for implementing goals. Multiple sources of information such as teachers, peers, employers, and families are needed in defining expectations for students' positive future outcomes.

As noted earlier, several researchers found families to play a prominent role in promoting positive student outcomes. Kohler (1993) and Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) mentioned family input into programming, although the exact role and nature of that input by families was not specified in either of those syntheses. According to Hughes et al. (1997), parents or other significant family members have unique and important information that they can communicate with professionals about the student that will aid in the transition-related process. Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) also documented the importance of schools in notifying parents (and students) about available vocational courses in their districts.
Summary

There are variations in the three research syntheses. The variations are likely to be related to differences in the orientations of the researchers when they identified research articles. Hughes et al. applied the lens of social validation to identify effective transition-related support strategies. Kohler (1993) examined transition practices that had been substantiated in the literature as being beneficial to students. Finally, Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) synthesized research linking secondary practices to positive student outcomes. It may also be true that changes in the field of transition that have occurred between the time Kohler’s article and the other two articles are reflected. The overall purposes of these reviews — to establish a knowledge base regarding the relationship between secondary transition practices and successful adult life — remained consistent.

Beyond these differences in orientation perhaps the most interesting finding are the themes that emerge. These themes included student preparation and training that results in student independence and success in adulthood, the importance of career assessment related to student interests and skills, and the need for collaboration in terms of planning for the future and the delivery of services from a variety of agencies. Staff development was also addressed. None of the reviews discussed pedagogy—only the curricular content and contextual factors (i.e., inclusion in academic or vocational classes) that would appear to improve student outcomes. Nor is there any mention of academic content standards and performance assessments that form the core of the educational restructuring movement.

Descriptions of Educational Reform

As a means for understanding the important relationship between transition and educational reform we identified two writings: The Right to Learn by Darling-Hammond (1997), and What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996. These writings describe educational reform policies, published at the same time as the transition-related research compilations, and promote student-centered learning. The student-centered learning philosophy closely matches the principle of individualized learning that characterizes special education. Similar to the transition-related research, these writing are concerned with students' post-school outcomes. The terminology used is about democracy and teaching students to become productive citizens.

We selected these more generic descriptions about the underlying beliefs associated with school reform because most research related to reform processes is in its infancy and focuses primarily on acquiring formative
evaluative information. Thus, we found no research compilations similar to those identified in the secondary school to transition literature. However, the fact that these works are informed by or the result of national educational commissions suggests that they contain compilations of research. Further these writings offer a perspective about reform that is not mired in the specifics of reform implementation, but rather that address the process and policies related to restructuring schools.

The writings provided a theoretical foundation from which we could examine the school-to-career transition empirically-based practices information for the purposes of comparison. We clustered the major elements of these readings into the four categories in our analytic framework found in Table 1. Because of the disparity between the types of reviews we analyzed in the two areas, direct comparisons cannot be made. Below we briefly describe the reform literature in the four framework areas and then describe how to align research efforts that result in mutually effective educational practices and promote the success of all students.

**Program Administration**

In the educational reform literature program, administration issues included the need to hire and support competent teachers, lower class sizes, and maintain smaller schools. According to Darling-Hammond (1997), student achievement is related to teachers’ familiarity with students on an individual basis and these relationships occur when teacher to student ratios are lowered and schools have fewer students. She recommends that schools reorganize their resources so that more staff is allocated as teaching faculty. One reason to have more teachers is to lower the student to teacher ratio in classrooms.

Teacher competence is the focus of school restructuring advocates. “Studies have found that teacher expertise is the single most important factor in determining students’ achievement...” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996, p. 12). Students’ right to have competent, caring, and qualified teachers is reiterated in these writings (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996). Quality teachers are considered to be a product of personnel preparation that emphasizes the attainment of professional standards. The standards address teachers’ subject matter expertise, understanding regarding student learning and development, and skills in using a range of strategies.

In terms of administration, hiring practices, professional development opportunities, teaching incentives (e.g., smaller classes, more time), and teacher evaluations are important for the maintenance and enhancement of quality. Administrators must be able to evaluate teacher performance, reward competence, and provide ongoing professional development to their staff to assure that only the most qualified teachers are hired and retained. In order
to stay abreast of good pedagogical practices, regularly scheduled periods of
time must be set aside that enable teachers to continually upgrade their skills
and knowledge and to promote the notion of teaching as a team experience.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

Curriculum and instruction, in this literature, seems to be directly related to
content standards (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future,
1996). The standards define what students need to learn and provide indicators
of acceptable performance that can be measured. According to Darling-
Hammond (1997) important strategies that positively affect learning include
engaging students as active participants in the learning process, creating
student “friendly” environments based upon sound development principles,
and incorporating cooperative learning activities into instructional methods.
The relationship between the teacher and students is crucial to the success of
the learning environment. In other words, teachers are aware of their students’
development and the previous knowledge that students bring to the learning
environments that affect the acquisition of new knowledge.

**Support Services**

In the educational reform literature, the term “support services” related
most closely with supporting students' acquisition of knowledge and skills.
For example, Darling-Hammond (1997) recommends that teachers support
learning by attending to students’ developmental needs and connecting
learning to students’ experiences. Assessment is mentioned in terms of
authentic assessments of student performance. Tests are criterion-based and
the teacher’s role is providing students with corrective feedback that allows
students to improve their performances.

**Formalized Articulation and Communication**

Consistent with the Formalized Articulation and Communication domain
described in the school-to-career transition education research, the two reform
writings stress that time be allocated for joint teacher planning. The vision is
that teachers will work as teams that support each other by sharing students,
making decisions together, and developing a common understanding related
to the workings of the collective school. Another area of partnership that is
specifically mentioned is the need for teachers to communicate with parents
and families in order to bridge the school and home worlds.
COMPARISON OF TRANSITION-RELATED RESEARCH AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM DESCRIPTIONS

In contrast to the empirical studies about school-to-career transition practices that focus on improving the future outcomes of students with special needs, educational research for non-labeled students focuses on the expertise of teachers. According to the report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, (1996) "...teaching and teachers are at the heart of school improvements...” (p.17). Several factors are noted as being associated with improving student achievement. The emphasis here is on students' success in school, not on post-school outcomes. The authors imply that school achievement is related to post-school outcomes but there is no direct discussion of the relationship. They suggest that student success is tied to quality professional development, both preservice and inservice.

The transition-related research and the reform writings have several identified strategies in common. Specifically, authentic assessment, cooperative learning strategies, collaboration, and parent involvement are the building blocks of transition services (Stilington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). In other words, the field of transition is already performing many tasks being called upon for creating better schools. Transition is, in essence, a reform structure. The problem is that transition services are designated for students with special needs. Even within the discipline of special education, transition services are most frequently perceived as being needed primarily by students with severe needs (or those who are considered to be unable to benefit from the academic curriculum). Further, the thrust of the transition research agenda has been on student outcomes (i.e., student achievement of adult statuses such as employment, relationships, and independence) with little attention, if any, to the teaching and learning processes associated with student progress (Lehmann, Bassett, & Sands, 1999). These research perspectives are not mutually exclusive; in fact they complement one another. Research in the area of reform clearly needs to examine how proposed policies and practices (standards and teacher competence) affect the future success of students and the field of school-to-career transition needs to explore the area of teacher quality in relationship to student achievement of goals.

Differences do exist, however, between the research about special education transition and the writings about general education reform. There appears to be a disconnection in their foci, as if these two educational spheres were moving in completely different orbits. One group is interested in the relationship between curricular interventions and student outcomes and the other is concerned with the effect quality teachers have on student learning; learning that is primarily academic in nature.
CONCLUSIONS

A limitation of our review is that it does not include more recent studies that may, in fact, address the role of transition services in the context of school reform. The gap between the perspectives of the two educational communities is apparent, however, even in the 1999 transition-related research review conducted by Kohler and Chapman (1999). Therefore, we end this article with some suggestions about how secondary special educators can re-align their program administration, curriculum and instruction, support services, and formalized articulation and communication to interface more closely with school reform efforts. The result would be a shift from an emphasis on the transition of secondary special education students to a focus on the improvement of the whole school curriculum and instruction.

Thus, for example, the program administration focus of transition special educators might shift from guidance and leadership in appropriate placement of students with disabilities to ensuring alignment of IEP processes with local content standards, providing leadership in how graduation requirements are fairly and equitably (if possible) implemented for students with disabilities, and making certain that students with various disabilities are appropriately integrated into high stakes testing processes. This refocusing may not necessarily represent a change in what these educators are doing in the schools, but rather a refocusing from individual student advocacy to systemic school reform.

Clearly teacher quality is an issue for all involved in education. Training, hiring, and retaining quality educators is clearly the focus of the reform ideas that we reviewed. Good teachers work in settings that allow them to develop relationships with students and parents and provide time for collaborative planning and staff training. The demand for competent educators warrants continued discussions and research relative to the transition specialists competencies promoted by the Division of Career Development and Transition (2000).

In the area of curriculum and instruction, the single most important issue here for transition special educators is advocacy for the re-emergence of local and state policy emphasis on workforce education and training as an appropriate curriculum addressing local standards. Again, the change is one of perspective and language – using the terminology of general education reform such as contextual teaching and learning, situated learning, authentic learning environments, and cognitive apprenticeships. Secondly, transition-related research should not ignore the connection between the use of good teaching strategies and student outcomes. Potential improvements to the field may exist in this area.

Traditional support services for secondary students appear to be as important and germane within a general education reform context as they
are within the special education transition context. Students with disabilities who are leaving high school need high-quality vocational assessments, career guidance, and job placement and supports. These needs will remain the same regardless of the curriculum, instruction, and whole school context in which they are taught.

Formalized articulation and communication might also move from facilitating a student focus of transition to working with parents and community groups to ensure they are involved in and advocating for appropriate inclusion and representation in local initiatives, such as charter and magnet schools, career academies, school-based enterprises, standards setting, after-school and year-long schooling, and block scheduling initiatives. Similarly, if their high school is involved with a teacher preparation program as a student teaching site, transition special educators could be in the forefront to ensure that secondary special education students benefit from student teaching experiences that include effective transition practices. Their efforts might also include guiding the high school toward a simultaneous renewal form of relationship with the teacher preparation institution (Goodlad, 1997), and guaranteeing that high quality performance assessments (modeled after vocational assessments) occur during the student teaching experiences.

The fact that the IDEA amendments of 1997 mandate that students with disabilities be included in district and school test processes with necessary accommodations means that special education cannot afford to ignore the reform movement. There is already evidence that students with special needs are being left out of reform discussions or are being excluded by reformist actions (Cobb et al., 2000). Omissions of students and important research findings from public discussions can lead to the disintegration of the good practices that transition services offer the education community.

Transition personnel face a dual-edged sword in the move towards nationalized education. They must either help students to achieve mastery of academic content standards at the risk of ignoring functional skills or they must identify strategies for linking standards to vocational and community-based learning (Bassett et al., 1997). The rationale for and the benefits of school-to-career transition services seem at risk in the context of educational restructurings and this status gives urgency to reconsideration of the transition-related research agenda. How can the school-to-career transition field have a voice and contribute to whole school educational reform? Revisiting the school-to-work transition research agenda may be a start. We believe it behooves the school-to-career transition special education community to become fluent in the language of reform and to continue to understand issues from the perspective of how students with disabilities may or may not benefit. Our intent, to paraphrase Darling-Hammond (1997),
must be to create coherent systems of learning whereby students are expected
to attain high standards where learning is not standardized.

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Funding for this review was provided by contract # H188G20002 from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The information presented does not necessarily represent the policies of the Department of Education and its endorsement should not be inferred.