

**‘Aging Out’: When Disabled Children Get Too Old for Public Education**

**by Jeffrey Zaslow**

Earlier this month, Curtis Melchi returned to High Point School in Ann Arbor, Mich., to accept a distinguished alumni award at graduation ceremonies.

Mr. Melchi, 32 years old, was lauded for working hard as a restaurant dishwasher, and for being a valued member of his church.

Because he has autism, his story meant a lot to the families of High Point’s 21 graduates. All of the grads have physical and cognitive challenges, such as Down Syndrome or cerebral palsy. But now that each has turned 26, the age at which disabled students in Michigan are no longer served by public education, it’s time for them to move into the adult world.

Across America this month, about 90,000 families have faced this same bittersweet moment, as their disabled children “age out” of state education systems. Most states provide education and care until age 21—Michigan is an exception. After that, families are on their own to find services and meaningful activities for their children.

That’s why these commencement ceremonies feel different from most others. Parents wonder: What kind of life are their children commencing? Often, they go to programs far inferior to what they had in school, or they sit in their parents’ homes (or group homes) and stare at TV.

Because of recent federal budget cuts, and chronic gaps in community funding for adults with disabilities, those leaving public education are “losing a level of care they can’t replicate,” says Neal Elyakin, High Point’s principal. His programs serve about 300 students with disabilities, ages 3 to 26.

Wearing a blue cap and gown, Adelia King graduated from the school this month. She has Rett Syndrome, a neurological disorder that leaves her unable to walk or talk. “People are congratulating me,” said her mother, Linda, at graduation. “But my daughter is graduating into the unknown.”

Up until graduation, good school districts provide individualized education for students, and handholding and paperwork-filing for parents. But once students graduate, parents must take charge, searching for vocational and mental-health programs paid for by the state or covered by insurance. They have to get their children on waiting lists for day care. Some parents tell social workers that they feel like they’ve gone from being a ship’s passenger to being the captain.

On High Point's graduation day, Holly Stautz, who has severe developmental problems, became one of about 80,000 adult Americans with disabilities now on waiting lists for government-funded services. Her mother, Janice, has her on a list for a county day-care program, but hasn't been told how long the wait will be. While Holly received bus service to school, her family will have to drive her to the day-care program if and when she gets in. For now, she's being cared for at home. Janice is checking into programs in neighboring counties, but says, "There's not a whole lot out there."

There are some resources for navigating the system. The PACER Center in Minneapolis ([www.taalliance.org](http://www.taalliance.org)) is a national information center for families with disabled loved ones. "I always tell parents, 'Never take 'no' from a government agency without asking, 'To whom do I appeal this decision?'" says Jane Johnson, a PACER transition specialist.

PACER also advises parents to start planning five to 12 years before their kids graduate, and to learn all they can about laws regarding housing, medical care and employment. If their children are capable of more independence, parents also must learn to involve their children in decisions—and to let go.

At High Point, Andrew Cobb was one of the highest functioning of this year's grads. He has ataxic cerebral palsy and Williams Syndrome, a genetic disorder. He now works at a supermarket, bagging groceries, but it will soon be closing, so he's losing that job. He has also worked at a Haunted House, and hopes to do so again this fall. "I take a guy and drown him in a vinegar vat," he explained. "I bring him up and he's a skeleton."

His mother, Janet, said her son's limited motor skills make it hard for him to pick up coins, so a lot of minimum-wage jobs would be hard for him. "The school system helped keep him busy and taught him life skills," she said. "Finding the right hole for my Andy to fit in is incredibly difficult."

At the graduation, students were escorted up the aisle, many in wheelchairs, and several of them blew kisses to loved ones. A video of their school years was shown, and the audience got a sense of the patience needed to teach them skills such as potato peeling. Teachers spoke briefly about each student's strengths. One student was complimented for her ability "to express herself with vocalizations and facial expressions." Another was lauded for the love he shows his mother.

One parent in the audience was Jill Barker. She has two sons, both with cerebral palsy and severe mental disabilities. Her younger son is at High Point. Her older son, Danny, graduated in 2003 and lives in a group home.

Ms. Barker pays \$30 a day for Danny to be taken to an adult activity program. Most of his five housemates remain in the home "all the time," she said. "They get out for doctors' appointments."

For countless adults with disabilities, school was the highlight of their lives. That's why, at the graduation ceremony, Ms. Barker asked some new graduates' parents: "Are you in mourning yet?" They told her they were.

When the ceremony ended, many parents smiled bravely as the graduates were escorted out of the auditorium to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance."