

# Urban Perspectives

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## Preventing Bullying Involving Students with Disabilities: A Three-Tier Strategy

by Ronald G. Slaby, PhD, Kim Storey, EdD and Ed Donnelly, MEd  
Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC)

### The Bullying Problem for Students with Disabilities

The research is clear that students with disabilities are generally at an unusually high risk for becoming involved in bullying. Compared to their peers without disabilities, students with disabilities have been found to be:

- More worried about school safety and being injured or harassed by peers<sup>[1]</sup>; and
- 2 to 3 times more likely to be victims of bullying.

Besides being more likely to become victims of bullying, students with disabilities experience bullying that is repeated more often, lasts longer, and usually directly related to their disabilities.<sup>[2]</sup>

In addition to their greater risk of victimization, some students with disabilities bully others in ways that are related to their disability. They may bully others, at least in part, because they become easily provoked and frustrated, misread social cues, misunderstand another's intent, lack peer support and protection, and/or use bullying to retaliate or seek negative attention. They also may exhibit behaviors that others misperceive as intentional bullying.

Bullying is different from disagreements, conflicts, and fights. Bullying is usually defined as a particular form of physical or emotional harm-doing that is (1) intentional, (2) repeated, and (3) power imbalanced. Although many students may be targeted by

bullies because they seem less powerful in one key area (e.g., their size, social status, or lack of friends), students with disabilities may be particularly vulnerable for involvement with bullying based on their relation to each of the three factors that define bullying.

Students with disabilities may:

- Misperceive a bully's harmful intentions or fail to comprehend the negative social consequences of their own behavior;
- Inadvertently invite repeated bullying by not fully realizing that they are being bullied or by responding in ways that seem to encourage further bullying; and/or
- Be perceived, due to their disability, as lacking the power or ability to respond effectively to bullying or to seek the support of friends or adults.

### State Anti-Bullying Laws Addressing Students with Disabilities

In the last 13 years, 48 states (with the exceptions of Montana and South Dakota) have passed anti-bullying legislation (Bullypolice.org). However, not all of these laws include language that addresses bullying prevention for students with disabilities. Massachusetts provides a clear example of how some states are requiring educators to apply bullying prevention and intervention strategies specifically to

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## SPOTLIGHT

# MEMBER PROFILE: **Cindy Green**



*Cindy Green,  
Assistant Superintendent  
of Student Services,  
Kalamazoo Public Schools*

The membership of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative is made up of leaders from large, medium, and small urban school districts across the United States. One long-time member of the Collaborative is Cindy Green, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services for Kalamazoo Public Schools. Kalamazoo is a small urban district with an enrollment of just under 13,000 students and approximately 1,700 students with disabilities. Cindy is well known among the Collaborative's members for her enthusiasm and energy, as well as for the role she has graciously accepted over the years as the facilitator of the Collaborative's small district size-alike sessions.

Cindy has led the Student Services Department in Kalamazoo since 2004. She was born and raised in Battle Creek, Michigan, where her experiences in babysitting children with special needs and involvement in a church-affiliated youth group drew her to the field of education and then to a career in special education. After graduating from Western Michigan University, Cindy worked four years with adults with cognitive disabilities. That experience provided her with connections to many community agencies, which would later serve her well as an administrator. Cindy has served as an elementary school special education teacher, special education supervisor, director, and now assistant superintendent.

Recently, Cindy received the 2011 Golden Apple award from the College of Education and Human Development Alumni Society of Western Michigan University. This award is given to outstanding educators who have been recognized by their peers for their dedication and commitment to their profession.

Ron Felton, Associate Director of the Collaborative, interviewed Ms. Green.

**RON:** Reflecting on your career, what is the most significant change you have seen in the education of students with disabilities?

**CINDY:** Without a doubt, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general

education is the most significant. When I was a special education classroom teacher in a segregated classroom, I saw my role as the person who would take children with disabilities and "save them." If teachers in my school were having problems with particular students, I would tell them just to send them to me. Now, here in Kalamazoo Public Schools, about 62 percent of our students with disabilities are in general education classes 80 percent or more of the day. This is so much better for students.

**RON:** I assume this has improved access for students with disabilities to the general education curriculum.

**CINDY:** Indeed. Some time ago, our school board approved allowing credit toward graduation to be awarded for general education courses that were taught by special education teachers in segregated classrooms. However, in many cases, the rigor was not there. Now, in light of our requirement to follow the Michigan Merit Curriculum and the possible adoption of the Common Core Standards, meeting requirements for graduation is much more challenging and will only become more so.

Currently, we have inclusive delivery models for our students. For example, we have ninth-grade academies in the high schools. What a difference! You go to an IEP meeting, and there are general education teachers at the meeting who know the students as well as the special education teachers do. Special education services are provided in the general education setting, and there is a great deal of collaboration among the team.

**RON:** Have there been any significant initiatives that have impacted students with disabilities in the Kalamazoo Public Schools?

**CINDY:** Certainly the Kalamazoo Promise is one of the most significant things to have happened here, and it positively impacts all students, including those with disabilities. Anonymous donors privately fund this program. It provides graduates of the Kalamazoo Public Schools who have been in the district four years or

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## SPOTLIGHT

continued from page 2 - *Cindy Green*

more with up to 100 percent of their tuition and mandatory fees for four years at Michigan's public universities and community colleges. Tuition checks began being dispersed in 2006. When the program was being planned, I was asked to be part of the conversation and to suggest how accommodations could be provided for college-bound students with disabilities so they could be eligible. All of my suggestions were accepted, and this program is available for those students as well. Since the Kalamazoo Promise was initiated, enrollment in the school district has grown, test scores have improved, and a greater proportion of high school graduates with and without disabilities are attending college.

Another area where we have been doing quite a bit of work is that of attendance. We have been particularly concerned with the numbers of suspensions of students with disabilities, particularly at the middle schools. We know that if we are to positively impact the achievement of students with disabilities, we must deal with this issue. We have initiatives to assist schools in using alternatives to suspension and have involved community agencies to help with peer mediation and conflict resolution strategies. We also monitor the suspension data very carefully and share these data with the school administrators. We have seen improvements, but we still have work to do in this area.

**RON:** What are some of the unique aspects of being a small-sized urban district?

**CINDY:** Unlike many of my colleagues in large urban districts, I personally have to handle things that they might have staff available to deal with. When I hear about the magnitude of the issues that the larger districts deal with, I am appreciative of the fact that I work in a community where I am able to have tight connections. I have every police chief's direct line on my phone as well as access to community mental health agencies and the health department. I never abuse this access, but it is good to know that these folks will pick up the phone when I call with an issue and will

help us out. We are like a small town with an urban flavor.

**RON:** The Collaborative's next meeting will focus on English language learners with disabilities. To what extent are services to this population of concern to you in Kalamazoo?

**CINDY:** Although we do not deal with as many languages as some larger urban districts, we do have a significant population of Spanish- and Arabic-speaking families. Fortunately, we have a superintendent who has a background in languages and is respectful of cultural differences while believing that the sooner students learn English the better. We have a bilingual elementary school that provides language immersion as well as instruction in English and Spanish using a 50/50 model. We have great collaboration between our special education and bilingual education departments, and meeting these students' needs in all of our schools is usually problem-free.

**RON:** As a long-time Collaborative member, what is it that keeps you active and involved in the organization?

**CINDY:** The Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative means a lot to me. The Collaborative provides ongoing ways of staying connected to other leaders in the field of education and helps me work to improve outcomes for students. The meetings, newsletters, and contacts assist me in serving students in my community. I learn so much from my peers who provide me with expertise, skills, and helpful hints. They are always an extremely valuable resource and support. The leaders of the Collaborative are very good at listening and guiding. I am constantly learning to do a better job from my experiences with the Collaborative, so membership is a high priority.

It is so important that all children have an opportunity to an outstanding public education. We need to provide our children with the best chance of being able to succeed in life, including postsecondary education, employment, housing, recreation, and daily living skills. The Collaborative helps me do this.

*"You go to an IEP meeting, and there are general education teachers at the meeting who know the students as well as the special education teachers do. . . .there is a great deal of collaboration among the team."*



*Dr. Janette Klingner,  
Professor of Education at  
the University of Colorado  
at Boulder*

## Janette Klingner to Keynote Spring 2012 Meeting

**Dr. Janette Klingner**, Professor of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, will keynote the Collaborative's Spring 2012 Meeting: "English Language Learners with Disabilities: Successes & Challenges."

Dr. Klingner is a nationally recognized leader in issues related to English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities. To date, she has authored or co-authored more than 100 articles, books, and book chapters, and presented at numerous national and international conferences. Her principal areas of research focus on the referral of ELLs to special education, reading comprehension strategy instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students, and Response to Intervention for ELLs. Until recently, she was a co-principal investigator for NCCRESt, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, a U.S. Department of Education-funded project to address the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. Dr. Klingner currently is President-Elect for the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Learning Disabilities and a Vice-President for the International Academy for Research on Learning Disabilities.

The importance of the meeting's primary focus—ELLs with disabilities—is highlighted in soon-to-be released demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau, which projects that by 2020, the proportion of children who are racial/ethnic minorities could pass 50 percent of the population under age 18. While Hispanic children account for most of this growth, the linguistic diversity of student populations in large and small school districts has expanded—sometimes dramatically so. With such increases have come an expanded need for quality programs and services to ELLs and an associated need for enhancing programs and services to ELLs with disabilities, particularly in light of the national movement to adopt the rigorous Common Core State Standards.

### Results of a Collaborative Member survey conducted in Fall 2011 indicate growing concerns for:

- How programs and services for ELLs with disabilities are designed and implemented
- More effective collaboration between those responsible for services to students with disabilities and those responsible for services to ELLs so that outcomes for this growing population of students may be improved
- How to satisfy increased and complicated staffing demands
- How to respond to the sometimes competing priorities of law and regulation and the increased scrutiny of monitoring agencies, such as the Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice

Dr. Klingner's keynote address, as well as presentations by a number of Collaborative Member Districts, will attempt to shed light on best practices being recommended to school districts and "what's working and why" at district and school levels.

The Spring 2012 Meeting will be held in Tampa, Florida, April 25–28. We anticipate an attendance of more than 200 special education, general education, and bilingual education leaders from school districts across the country.

**2012 SPRING MEETING**  
**April 25-28, 2012**  
**Hyatt Regency Tampa**  
**Tampa, Florida**

**English Language  
Learners with Disabilities:  
Successes & Challenges**

**THE COLLABORATIVE**  
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# District- and School-Level Collaboration between English Language Learners and Special Educators in the Pre-Referral and Referral Processes

by *María Teresa Sánchez, PhD, Senior Research Associate  
Education Development Center*

When a student who is an English language learner (ELL) struggles to learn English at the expected pace, falls behind academically, or exhibits inappropriate behaviors, educators must discuss and decide upon the provision of supports and interventions, as well as monitor the student's progress. If the student continues to struggle, educators need to decide whether this is caused by lack of appropriate instruction, the student's difficulty in developing second language skills, or a learning disability. District and school personnel play a critical role in meeting the needs of ELLs who are struggling and dealing with this critical issue that warrants innovative changes in instructional practices, professional development, and appropriate service delivery options. This article will summarize the approaches of three school districts supporting ELLs with disabilities.

What we know thus far is that children acquire a second language in different ways and go through stages of language acquisition that often appear similar to a child who has a learning disability. Research also suggests that developing a second language takes time, with academic language taking almost twice as long as interpersonal or social language. Thus, meeting the instructional needs of ELLs in the general education setting, including their second language development needs, is a critical first step in determining whether a student's struggle is due primarily to a disability or the process of developing a second language.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) mandates that a child cannot be said to have a learning disability unless educators provide evidence of the student receiving

robust instruction, including second language instruction. IDEA 2004 encourages schools and districts to implement early intervention (pre-referral) processes to investigate the reasons for the difficulties and to develop solutions. In the past decade, Response to Intervention (RtI) has gained attention as an early intervening structured process of tiered support for addressing the individual needs of students experiencing academic and/or behavioral difficulties, including those of ELLs, through universal screening, tiered interventions and progress monitoring schedules (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2012).

The organization and culture of both schools and school districts play an important role in their ability to meet the diverse needs of ELLs, as well as those with disabilities. The ways in which district and school personnel collaborate shape the way resources are utilized in schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). There is research in monolingual settings that focuses on the role of collaborative consultation, collaborative problem-solving, and co-teaching. While researchers and practitioners consider collaboration between special education and second language acquisition personnel as pivotal to supporting the needs of struggling ELLs, little research has been done on such collaborative structures and coordination with regard to this student population.

This article focuses on the analysis of three mid-size districts' collaborative structures: (1) between the districts' special education and ELL departments, (2) between the district and middle schools, and (3) within the schools themselves, during the pre-referral and referral process. This article draws upon data from a larger study on



*María Teresa Sánchez, PhD*

*“While researchers and practitioners consider collaboration between special education and second language acquisition personnel as pivotal to support the needs of struggling ELLs, little research has been done on such collaboration and coordination...”*

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Ronald G. Slaby, PhD

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students with disabilities. The law also states that it is the responsibility of school personnel to ensure this right.

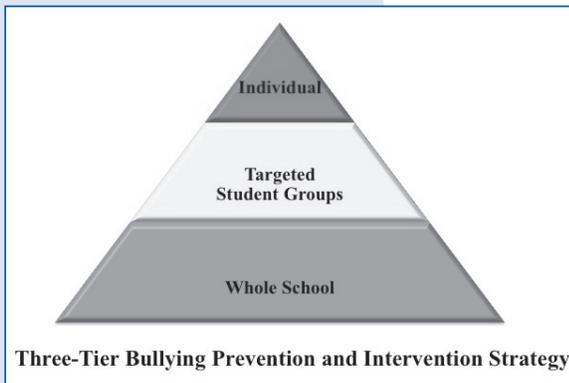
The Massachusetts Bullying Prevention and Intervention Law is built on the premise that all students—no matter their race, creed, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or physical or mental abilities—have an inherent right to an education free from any form of bullying.

All Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) have a check box that asks the question:

*Does this student have social-emotional needs that might make him or her a target for bullying?*

The IEP team must determine whether the student has a disability that affects social skills development or whether the student may participate in, or be vulnerable to, bullying, harassment, or teasing because of his or her disability. If so, the team must consider what should be included in the IEP “to build each student’s social skills and proficiencies to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing.” [3]

### A Three-Tier Strategy to Prevent Bullying Involving Students with Disabilities



There is a clear and compelling need for educators throughout the United States to adopt a systematic and comprehensive strategy for effectively preventing and stopping bullying involving students with disabilities. The Bullying Prevention and Research Institute (BPRI) at EDC has partnered with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) to develop and

implement a strategy that meets this need. The BPRI strategy introduces professional development, family outreach, education, intervention, and resource tools designed to address the problem of bullying involving students with disabilities at each of three levels: whole school, targeted student groups, and individual.

#### Level 1: The Whole School Strategy

Many students with disabilities who are at risk for being involved in bullying need the

help and support of everyone in the school. Classmates along with all the teachers, staff, students, and parents in a school need to understand that:

Bullying is never acceptable.

Bullying is against the law.

No one deserves to be bullied.

The law requires that all school personnel receive training in understanding bullying and effective ways to prevent it. Teachers are required to report bullying and to intervene in bullying situations. Assemblies, poster contests, and other school-wide initiatives need to involve all students—with and without disabilities—in understanding, respecting, and supporting each other.

**The Whole School Strategy creates a safe, secure, respectful, and inclusive school climate in which all students—with and without disabilities—actively prevent bullying involving students with disabilities.**

#### Level 2: The Targeted Student Group Strategy

Schools often ignore what may be the biggest source of their bullying problem—the skills-building needs of students without disabilities. Students would benefit from participating in structured small-group interventions, facilitated by trained teachers and counselors, where they practice positive social interactions and develop bullying prevention skills. These groups—which may include students with and without disabilities—can occur during class, lunch, recreation, or afterschool.

**The Targeted Student Group Strategy prepares specific groups of students to understand and respect students with disabilities, and to practice the skills they need to prevent and respond to the bullying of students with disabilities.**

#### Level 3: The Individualized Strategy

Students with disabilities who are at risk for or are involved in bullying need to develop specific strategies tailored to their special needs. For students with disabilities, this individualized strategy is largely addressed through their IEPs.

**Through specific goals tailored to the needs of the individual student, students with**

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disabilities can learn and practice skills to protect them from bullying. For example, students may be taught to understand when they are being bullied and to practice using assertive responses, such as “Stop!” or “Leave me alone!” or by asking others to help.

In addition to IEPs, individualized intervention may be needed for students, both with and without disabilities, who show persistent and severe patterns of involvement with bullying. The Saturdays for Success Program—a joint project of BPS and EDC—was designed to address this need.

**Saturdays for Success** is a skills-building program for students referred for problems with bullying and/or victimization. It provides an educational alternative to suspension for bullies and an intervention for victims through targeted counseling, intervention sessions, and group activities. All students attend eight consecutive weekly sessions for four hours each Saturday morning. Peer leaders, recruited from individual schools, are students who have expressed or shown interest in becoming actively involved in bullying prevention. Based on observations and anecdotal evidence, the program is very successful in meeting its goals. Students are engaged with the program activities, and actively involved in developing new social skills and practicing bullying prevention strategies. When they return to their schools, victims report that they are not victimized anymore; bullies engage in more positive social interactions with their peers; and peer leaders actively help to create and maintain bullying-free school environments.

## Conclusion

It is clear that bullying is hurtful—not only to the bullies, victims, and bystanders, but to the entire school and community. Over the past 35 years, new laws and societal changes have opened public schools for all children. As our schools and communities have become more inclusive, it is critical that all school personnel recognize, understand, and address the needs of all students.

Students with disabilities are at a very high risk for becoming involved with bullying, but this reality can be changed. Bullying involving students with disabilities can be stopped and prevented through education and interventions specifically designed to address the unique characteristics of bullying for students with disabilities. To be

maximally effective, implementation should be delivered at all three levels: whole school, targeted student groups, and individual. Through this three-tier strategy, the entire school and community will come to understand that bullying is not acceptable, and will be prepared to take responsible and effective action to ensure that ALL students have the opportunity to learn in a bullying-free environment.

## References

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## Resources

*Eyes on Bullying* is a resource for teachers, parents, and other adults who care for children and youth. It provides information, insights, strategies, and activities to address bullying.

Eyes on Bullying toolkit: <http://www.eyesonbullying.org/pdfs/toolkit.pdf>

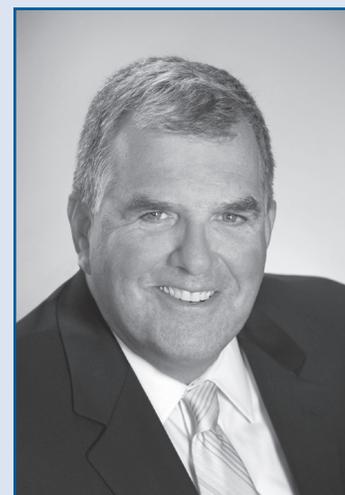
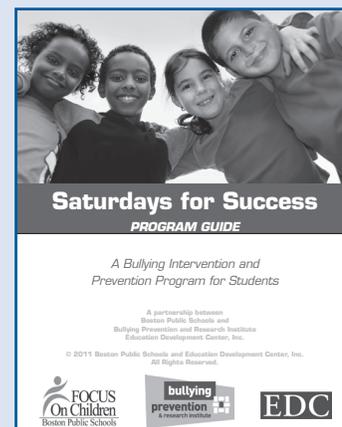
Eyes on Bullying website: [www.eyesonbullying.org](http://www.eyesonbullying.org)

Boston Public Schools Anti-bullying Resources  
[www.bostonpublicschools.org/antibullying](http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/antibullying)

*For more information contact  
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or Kim Storey at [kstorey@edc.org](mailto:kstorey@edc.org).*



*Kim Storey, EdD*



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*Ms. Lynn Holdheide, Vanderbilt University Research Associate in the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality*

## Taking Measure of How We Evaluate Our Special Education Teachers: A Report from the Collaborative's Fall 2011 Meeting

The Collaborative held its Fall Meeting in Austin, Texas—the “Live Music Capital of the World”—from October 26–29, 2011 to look at the issue of highly effective special education teachers in urban schools. Some 200 participants from 62 Collaborative Member school districts gathered to listen to experts, network with colleagues, and discuss one of the hottest topics in education right now.

### Consultancy Sessions

The meeting opened with consultancy sessions, during which Austin Independent School District (ISD) and Round Rock ISD presented two dilemmas for discussion and feedback: (1) increasing participation in the non-modified state assessment by students with disabilities and (2) providing appropriate services to students who are both cognitively impaired and have significant behavior difficulties. The sessions proved beneficial to presenters and participants, with both school districts reporting that the sessions gave them new perspectives on the challenges and potential solutions to these dilemmas.

### Size-Alike Discussions

The next morning participants gathered in size-alike groups—small, medium, and large urban school districts—to discuss what they perceive to be the essential characteristics of quality special education teachers in urban schools. Conversations generated a range of attributes valued by members as necessary for being an effective special educator. Furthermore, school districts identified questions they hoped would be addressed during the conference and discussed what resources they needed to effectively plan and create a teacher evaluation system.

### Welcome Address

The welcome address featured Janna Lilly, Director of Special Education, and

Mark Williams, School Board President, both from Austin ISD, and also Linda Noy, Director of Special Education from Round Rock ISD. After providing a warm welcome to Texas and the Austin area, the speakers highlighted a few successes and challenges in their own work to improve and support special needs populations.

### Keynote Address

Ms. Lynn Holdheide, the meeting's keynote speaker, led an interactive and thought-provoking session: “Challenges in Evaluating Special Education Teachers: Linking Teacher Effectiveness to Student Outcomes.”

Ms. Holdheide brought a national perspective from her role as Vanderbilt University's Research Associate for the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (TQ Center), one of five federally funded national centers that provides support to state departments of education and other related agencies. Ms. Holdheide, a former special education teacher, provided unique insight on the topic. As part of her presentation, she shared the findings of a recent investigation conducted by the TQ Center on the current practices of evaluating special education teachers ([www.tqsource.org/publications/July2010Brief.pdf](http://www.tqsource.org/publications/July2010Brief.pdf)). The findings of the report revealed that the field, not surprisingly, is facing a multitude of challenges in identifying special education's purpose and defining and differentiating the varying roles that special educators assume.

During her lively discussion, Ms. Holdheide asked the audience to consider current teacher evaluation frameworks and how these might be differentiated for instructional context and content. She encouraged participants to think of the benefits and challenges this presents and to keep in mind the implications if the process is not differentiated.

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At the beginning of the presentation, Ms. Holdheide set two learning targets for the audience. Namely, participants would be (1) better able to articulate the challenges in evaluating special education teachers and (2) better prepared to actively participate in the creation and/or redesign of special education teacher evaluation systems. It was clear by the end of the session that participants met both learning targets and left with a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues that must be explored to get special educator evaluation right.

Note: Ms. Holdheide's presentation will be made available to Collaborative Members and Associates in the Members Section of the Collaborative's website. (<http://www.urbancollaborative.org/>)

## Plenary Session

Friday morning's plenary session, "Characteristics of Effective Special Education Teachers in Urban Schools," was led by Dr. Sharon Vaughn, H.E. Hartfelder/Southland Corp Regents Chair and Executive Director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk, University of Texas. Dr. Vaughn spoke on what the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mean for special education populations. Specifically, she asked the audience to think about how to provide equity and excellence to special needs students when implementing the CCSS, emphasizing several factors that special education personnel will need to consider:

- Making instructional adaptations within increased complex text demands;
- Understanding and working effectively within the demands of the general education curriculum; and
- Understanding and effectively communicating academic vocabulary across content.

Following Dr. Vaughn's presentation, several panelists from the Association of Texas Professional Educators and the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association were invited to comment.



*Plenary Session Speaker Dr. Sharon Vaughn, Executive Director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at The University of Texas at Austin.*

## Concurrent Sessions – Special Educator Evaluation

After the morning plenary, participants had the opportunity to revisit the topic of special educator evaluation during concurrent sessions with six districts from around the country. The districts presented new and recently revised teacher evaluation systems, describing how each system evaluates special education teachers. A range of designs were showcased, each at a different stage of implementation. For example, Austin ISD, in its first year of implementation, is using this year as a pilot. Other school districts, such as Washoe County School District (NV) and Cincinnati Public Schools (OH), have had their systems in place longer and so are more established.

The presentations reinforced the diversity of approaches school districts are taking to evaluate special education teachers. For most districts, observations play an important role in the overall evaluation process, and districts use various approaches:

- Understanding the unique roles of special educators, Memphis City Schools (TN) uses modified rubrics for classroom observations of special education teachers.
- Houston ISD created instructional practice guides to help administrators with their observations.
- Other districts provide training for administrators who observe special education teachers.

Presenting school districts also differed on how they assess their special needs students

and use student assessment data to measure student growth. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), summative assessments in the content areas were developed for students with severe cognitive disabilities. In Memphis, special education teachers choose from a menu of pre-approved assessments, including AIMSweb, KTEA, and Brigance. Austin ISD bases student growth on measures specific to the students taught in a given school year. Teachers can choose how they want to attribute their student growth measure: to just those students for whom they provided services or to the entire class (as in an inclusion model setting).

These examples are just a few of the many pieces comprising the teacher evaluation systems presented. The Collaborative is interested in looking more closely at how districts are addressing the challenges of evaluating special education teachers and has convened a working group of scholars at EDC to report on the strategies and tools that districts are using and implementing. Look forward to a brief paper on these findings this summer.

For more information about the keynote and concurrent session presentations, visit [www.urbancollaborative.org](http://www.urbancollaborative.org).

## Registration for Spring Meeting

Registration for our Spring 2012 Meeting, featuring the theme "English Language Learners with Disabilities: Service Delivery Challenges and Successes," is now open. Please visit [www.urbancollaborative.org](http://www.urbancollaborative.org) for more information.

process and challenges in identifying learning disabilities among students who are ELLs in New York middle schools. ([http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL\\_2010085.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2010085.pdf))

### Collaboration at the District Level

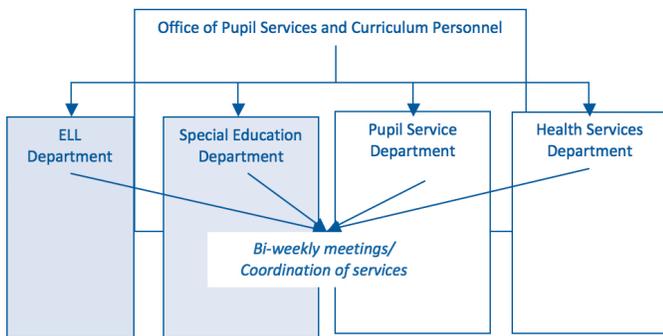
The three districts studied provide examples of different levels of collaboration among the ELL and special education departments when struggling ELLs were suspected of having a learning disability. In District 1 (Figure 1), each department worked independently. Guidance and support during pre-referral processes was the responsibility of the special education department even when the cases discussed involved students who were ELLs. The ELL department became involved only at the referral stage when English proficiency assessments were reviewed and a member of the department was invited to the Committee on Special Education.

**Figure 1:**  
*District 1 Structure Between the ELL and Special Education Departments*



Of the three districts, District 2’s interdepartmental collaboration efforts were the most intentional and active. Both the ELL and special education department were part of the same office (see Figure 2). Their directors held biweekly meetings to ensure that they provided adequate services to all their students. These directors and their staff worked collaboratively on coordination of service provision and monitoring, development of guidelines for pre-referral and referral, and pooling resources and information. In addition, they provided staff at both the ELL and special education departments and all staff at the middle school with professional development opportunities on second language acquisition, learning disabilities, and the intersection between these two areas.

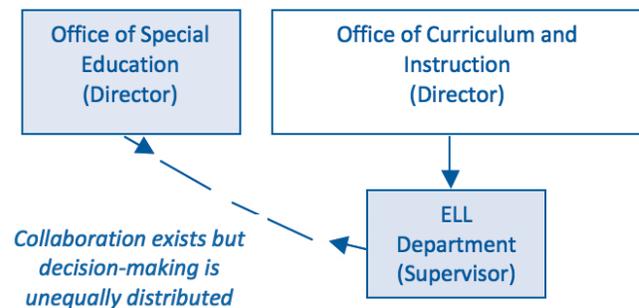
**Figure 2:**  
*District 2 Structure Between the ELL and Special Education Departments*



In District 3, staff who worked in the ELL and special education departments communicated with each other and collaborated on developing guidelines for struggling ELLs who might have learning disabilities and also on pre-referral and referral procedures when

the cases involved students who were ELLs. However, interviewees reported tension between the perspectives of these two departments because the special education department had greater decision-making authority than the ELL department. Special education was a separate office with its own director, while the ELL supervisor reported to the director of curriculum and instruction. Interviewees mentioned that the final decision about ELLs who might have learning disabilities seemed to rest with the special education department and did not always take into account the expertise and judgments of the ELL supervisor.

**Figure 3:**  
*District 3 Structure between the ELL Department and Special Education Office*



### Collaboration at the Middle School Level

In the middle schools studied in each of the districts, the communication and collaboration that happened at the district level was also evident at the schools. Districts differed in the consistency of opportunities for school staff to discuss ELLs’ progress and in the access to staff with expertise in second language development and disabilities to help develop strategies for supporting students who were ELLs.

In District 1 middle schools, teachers discussed struggling students informally, on a case-by-case basis. Depending on teachers’ personal relationships, they sometimes had access to a person with second language development expertise. District 2 was the only district in the study that was implementing RtI at the time of data collection. In the middle schools, teachers met daily in grade-level content meetings, and these teams had access to support personnel with second language development expertise (such as psychologists, social workers, and English-as-a-second-language [ESL] teachers). Child study teams discussing a student who was an ELL invited the schools’ bilingual support personnel to participate and could consult with district level staff from the ELL and special education departments. In addition, supervisors from the ELL and special education departments regularly visited the schools and participated in meetings with the school chairs, principals, assistant principals, and child study teams. This process helped to connect ELL, special education, and general education personnel to better serve ELLs. In District 3, although some ESL and content teachers co-taught their classes and the child study teams included personnel with knowledge of second language development, there was little evidence of consistent district-to-school or within-school collaboration between the special education and ELL educators.

*continued on page 11*

## Fostering Collaborative Practices between the ELL and Special Education Departments

The examples provided above, in agreement with previous research (Wilkinson et al., 2006), suggests that an interdisciplinary approach between the ELL and special education departments is the most effective way of supporting struggling students who are ELLs and accurately identifying the presence of a learning disability. Here are some strategies from the districts studied that appear to facilitate productive collaboration among special education and ELL educators both at the district- and school-levels. In the context of RtI, this collaboration should be expanded to include staff in the general education setting:

- Establish regular district-level meetings between ELL and special education departments. These meetings could address policies, guidance, services, supports, use of data, and professional development.
- Organize district offices in a way that ELL and special education department leaders have corresponding positions of authority or decision-making.
- Coordinate school-based services provided by ELL and special education departments, allowing support staff from both departments to consult with each other when working with struggling students who are ELLs and/or their teachers.
- Provide structured opportunities for teachers to access support personnel with knowledge of second language development and special education. Create opportunities for grade-level teachers to consistently meet with ESL teachers and special educators as well as counselors, psychologists, and evaluators with knowledge of second language acquisition and/or disabilities.
- Provide professional development opportunities on second language acquisition, disabilities, and their intersection to all teachers and support personnel.

It is well documented that many educators working with ELLs do not have adequate knowledge of second language development and instruction, learning disabilities, the intersection between these two,

and students' cultural backgrounds (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Orozco et al, 2008). While professional development is important to building a common knowledge in all people involved in supporting ELLs, the conscious and purposeful fostering of a culture of collaboration between individuals with different expertise at district- and school-levels is essential to maximize the use of resources and problem-solving strategies in support of students who are ELLs. In order for inter-departmental and within-school collaboration to occur, district and school personnel may need to create procedures, schedules, and budgets that provide the foundation and direction for personnel in different departments to meet and share expertise and resources.

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