Common language and common understanding are the bread and butter of school reform. Whether there are 10 or 800 buildings in a school district, these are particularly crucial when the need is that each staff member in every department has an ever-deepening understanding of the mission and value behind a multi-tiered, problem-solving approach to serving students and families in the community.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the nation, comprises eight regions; serves more than 700,000 students in 891 K–12 schools; and maintains 208 schools and centers dedicated to early education, community adult education, or occupation centers. Geographically, the district is spread out over 710 square miles, with a 29-story central office building in the middle.

Why are these facts important? Ultimately, the adoption of a multi-tiered, problem-solving improvement process, such as Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI²), is built upon consensus, infrastructure, and implementation—all of which take communication, a common vision, and a commitment to action.

Toward that end, and with the assistance of Dr. George Batsche, Professor and Co-Director of the Institute for School Reform at the University of South Florida, staff spent the latter half of 2008–2009 on tour throughout the school district, presenting a one-day overview of RtI² at regional principal and various organization meetings. The purpose of these events was to build interest, take away the fear of something new, build a common vocabulary, and start turning on the light bulbs that RtI² (coined by Jack O’Connell, continued on page 8
Jane Rhyne, PhD, is currently the assistant superintendent of Programs for Exceptional Children, Charlotte—Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools serve more than 133,000 students, including 14,000 students with disabilities, and is 1 of the 20 largest school districts in the United States. Dr. Rhyne began her 39-year career in special education in Fairfax County, Virginia, as a teacher of students with visual impairments, during which time she became the program specialist in that category of disability. In 1981, she began working in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, where she has served as a school site administrator, area coordinator, and area superintendent. Currently, as assistant superintendent, Dr. Rhyne provides leadership for program planning and implementation, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and compliance in special education.

Dr. Rhyne is an active, engaged, and highly regarded member of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative. She was the recipient of the Special Education Administrator Award from the North Carolina CASE Council for Administrators of Special Education, and has provided information and testimony to Congress on several occasions regarding No Child Left Behind and Student with Disabilities Acts. Additionally, Dr. Rhyne will be the host for the Fall 2010 Meeting this October in Charlotte.

RON: Reflecting on your career, what progress has been made relative to the education of students with disabilities?

JANE: I began my career in special education prior to the passage of Public Law 94-142, and over the many years, I have seen a distinct shift in focus from compliance, which is still important, to a focus on student outcomes. We still have to make sure we are compliant, but our work has become less about the legal aspects of special education and more about achievement outcomes. This is a change I have been very happy to see and involves me in work I really enjoy doing.

When I look back at the history of special education, I see the changes in special education always having revolved around the issue of access. In the early days, it was, for many students with disabilities, simply about gaining access to public schools and public education. Once all students were in our school systems, the focus expanded to include providing access to adequate facilities. I can remember in those early days special education being provided in lots of small, often windowless classrooms in basements, sometimes next to boiler rooms. We have gone from that to having many students with disabilities situated in the main school building and being instructed in general education classrooms in their home schools. Now when we talk about access, it is typically about access to the curriculum, access to high-quality instruction, and access to high-quality instructional materials and equipment. This is a huge change and a welcome one.

Another welcome change has been the fact that students with disabilities now “count” in our accountability system, and the dimensions of accountability for students with disabilities have widened. As a result, schools leaders understand that they are responsible for the achievement outcomes for all their students, including those in special education. In our school district, we emphasize co-teaching and provide professional development on six different models. As a result, we have found that students with and without disabilities have benefited. We provide our students with disabilities the same instructional materials and equipment as we do students without disabilities, as well as with wonderful assistive technology that gets more and more sophisticated by the day.

RON: What about changes for students with significant disabilities?

JANE: We have seen a dramatic shift in the curriculum that is provided to our students with significant intellectual disabilities.
Our students are taught the Extensions of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. As such, they are learning academics at grade appropriate levels. Over the years, we have moved from a developmental approach to a functional one and now to an academic focus. We have seen students achieve things that we never thought they could. This makes me wonder if we have had high enough expectations for this group of children. We have been very fortunate to partner with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in several federally funded grants. As a result of this work, research-based curriculum has been developed, and our students and teachers have benefited.

RON: What challenges do we now face in educating students with disabilities in urban school districts?

JANE: The first that comes to mind is budget. Our federal stimulus funding has been wonderful. We have been able to do things we would never have done without this money. For example, we've put SMARTBoards in all of our self-contained classes and provided training to our teachers in how to use them. We are developing a Performance Management electronic system that will provide data to our teachers, principals, and district administrators around special education. We will use this to better inform us about our outcomes, show us where we have problems, and help us to make decisions about actions to take. We are launching a new math curriculum for our co-teaching teams in Algebra 1 that uses technology and provides intense professional development and monitoring. I worry about the funding cliff that will occur once this money goes away as we also use this funding to pay teachers. Our local and state budgets have been hit very hard and every department in our district has had to take cuts. We don't expect a quick turnaround.

RON: What do you foresee in the field that you are most excited about?

JANE: I believe we'll see a focus on outcomes for students as measured by growth rather than strict performance, as reflected in new accountability measures of No Child Left Behind. Teachers will be held accountable for this growth, and their paychecks will be affected by it. Schools that are low performing will be strategically staffed with proven leaders and teachers. More students will participate in virtual courses. We’ll see co-teaching with online courses. This is something that we are doing in Charlotte to help with our challenges in the highly qualified teacher arena. I anticipate that technology will be more fully integrated into instruction; we'll have new devices to do new things. Our emphasis on the use of data to inform decision-making will continue to grow, and sophisticated data systems will be essential for operation.

I am also excited that Response to Intervention has taken hold, and I believe we will see fewer students identified for special education. We are beginning to see general education teachers doing what only special education teachers did in the past. In our school district, the percent of students with disabilities has decreased over the years, an increasing diversity and increasing levels of poverty. The students who do qualify, however, will be more complex.

RON: Given what you have accomplished over nearly 40 years, is retirement in your immediate future?

JANE: I am not finished yet. Retirement is not imminent for me. I work with great people and there are many things—like an exciting new math curriculum for our Algebra 1 co-teaching teams—I want to see to completion. I am just not done yet, and I love what I do.
Ringing school bells and big yellow buses are a sure signal that educators and students around the country are back in school for another challenging and hopefully exciting year. This fall, a projected 56 million students will be enrolled in the nation’s elementary and high schools. Nearly 13 percent of these students will be youth with identified disabilities, and approximately 25 percent of them who are entering ninth grade for the first time will be at risk of dropping out before their senior year. Keeping youth with disabilities on track for on-time graduation will be a major challenge for schools. As this new school year begins, the following five tips—abbreviated as Prime—from the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities offers some strategies for helping to keep your students on track.

Within a classroom culture that supports a growth mindset, teachers can design meaningful learning tasks that foster student engagement, resilience, and long-term achievement—thus ultimately leading to an improved likelihood that students will remain in school and graduate.

Back to School in Prime Time

By Loujeania Williams Bost, PhD

Within a classroom culture that supports a growth mindset, teachers can design meaningful learning tasks that foster student engagement, resilience, and long-term achievement—thus ultimately leading to an improved likelihood that students will remain in school and graduate.

Provide support and enrichment for marginalized students who enter high school with poor academic skills and other prevalent risk factors. Ninth grade has been identified as the “make it or break it year.” Nearly all youth will struggle to some degree when entering high school for the first time. For one thing, the landscape has changed, and students are faced with looming hallways, new schedules, seemingly endless course options, and extracurricular choices. In addition, they may be worried about fitting in, finding friends, and staying on track. Many students also enter high school already experiencing multiple risk factors associated with school dropout. Identifying marginal students early in the school year and providing them with specialized support can improve their chances of earning sufficient credits for promotion to 10th grade.

Strategy: Use your incoming student data to identify youth who are at risk for dropping out. For example, cross walk your data to identify the list of incoming freshmen who as 8th graders were absent more than 10 days, scored below basic on the 8th grade assessments for language arts and math, and had three or more office/disciplinary referrals (ODRs). This list will provide you with students to target for support and enrichment throughout the year.

Review and alter marginal policies that are counterproductive to school completion. Effective policies consist of clear, well-defined statements that guide district administrators and other personnel in developing guidelines to ensure that district missions, goals, and practices are carried out with efficiency and parity. Good policies consider ramifications of interrelated policies and can help eliminate confusion and promote school completion. However, frequently our schools, in an attempt to increase classroom safety and improve student responsibility, adopt policies that all too quickly slam doors in the faces of at-risk students and are counterproductive to increased graduation and lower dropout rates. Research consistently reveals that repeated use of exclusionary discipline practices have been identified as one of the major factors contributing to dropout.

Strategy 1: Make sure your zero tolerance policies do not go beyond the mandated requirements of zero tolerance. The “one strike you’re out” policy is leading to more suspensions and expulsions of students than in the past and is counterproductive, as it simply removes the problem behavior from the school and places it back into the community.

Strategy 2: Provide alternatives to credit loss when a student is passing the class but misses more than the required days of “in seat” time. Providing opportunities for students to recover credits lost will also increase their ability to earn credits needed to graduate.

Incorporate an early warning system as a core component of your schoolwide data system to identify students’ distress signals. Some think students drop out randomly,
rarely signaling they are in distress. In fact, dropping out is most often predictable. Research findings consistently identify that students are knocked off course from on-time high school graduation in grades 6 through 9 by the ABCs—attendance, behavior, and course completion.

**Strategy:** Queue your data system to flag students who are approaching critical thresholds. Pay attention to the ABCs of drop-out prevention—attendance, behavior, and course performance. Recognize and act on student distress signals:

- **Attendance:** Students in grades 6–10 who miss 10, 20, or more days of school are sending increasingly loud distress signals.
- **Behavior:** Middle and high school students who get suspended need support to stay on track, as well as those who remain in school but consistently misbehave or lack effort.
- **Course performance:** Middle and high school students who receive an F, particularly in math or English, or two or more F’s in any course are falling off the graduation path. D’s and very low GPAs are also causes for concern.

**Make it meaningful.** The massive exodus from American high schools is not inevitable. Many students drop out due to difficult home or family circumstances. However, recent research suggests that even for these students, dropping out is also closely related to how schools operate, how rigorous they are, and whether or not students see that school has real-world relevance. While rigor and relevance are two of the new “three Rs,” students are reporting a lack of rigor and relevance in their work. In two recent studies involving youth with and without disabilities, students reported that classes are not interesting, students do not feel connected to school, and students do not see the purpose or relevance in school work provided by some teachers (Bridgeland, Dilulio, &Morison, 2006). In fact, 66 percent of youth participating in a study of student engagement responded that they were bored every day in class.

**Strategy:** Provide multiple methods that involve work (career skills) and learning (academics), including discussions and debates, group projects, active participation, role-playing, presentations, and technology. Create a culture of growth mindset in the classroom. Praising students for the engagement of tasks, applied effort, strategies used, choices they made, and persistence they displayed yields greater long-term benefits than just saying “good job” when they succeed or get the right answer. Within a classroom culture that supports a growth mindset, teachers can design meaningful learning tasks that foster student engagement, resilience, and long-term achievement—thus ultimately leading to an improved likelihood that students will remain in school and graduate.

Engage families. To ensure that the students of today are ready for the careers of tomorrow, families and schools need to work together to promote engagement that is systemic, sustained, and integrated into school improvement efforts. Over 30 percent of research findings support the conclusion that engaging families in their children’s education increases student achievement and decreases dropout rates. As such, effective family engagement must be a part of any district’s school completion strategy. Creating partnership between parents and educators, with a concerted effort to move beyond involvement to active parent engagement, will require that schools know families, communicate effectively and respectfully with families, and demonstrate competence and commitment to the children they share.

**Strategy 1:** Communicate with parents about positive experiences with their child—not just the negative ones.

**Strategy 2:** For meetings or presentations that families cannot attend, provide options for them to access the presentation, such as a CD ROM or video or e-mail documents, and make sure they have the necessary technology.

**Strategy 3:** Have a variety of ways in which families may be involved. Remember everyone has a talent and one size will not fit all. Some families may not be able to attend

**continued on page 9**
The Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative’s highly successful institute, sponsored with the University of Maryland, “Unlocking the Power of District Data to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities,” was funded for another year by the U.S. Department of Education. (See Urban Perspectives Winter/Spring 2010 issue for a summary of the 2009 institute.) The goal of the institute is to help school districts build capacity in analyzing large-scale data sets to make real and measurable improvements in outcomes for students with disabilities.

Eleven member school districts have been selected to participate in the 2010 two-day, hands-on institute in Rockville, Maryland, at the end of September. As part of the application process, school districts were asked to submit questions related to IDEA performance indicators that they would like to answer by exploring the data sets available to them from their student information systems. Both prior to and during the institute, participants received guidance on refining their questions to get answers that will assist them with action-planning and decision-making.

The institute also focused on ways to present data to inform stakeholders, stimulate change, and ultimately improve outcomes for students.

Each district will be represented by their special education administrator and lead data support person. One of the unique and powerful aspects of the institute was the opportunity for special education leaders and data specialists to have uninterrupted time to explore student data and share their respective expertise, while also receiving support and guidance from experts in the field of data analysis and reporting.

The 2010 participating member districts:
- Anchorage School District (AK)
- Brockton Public Schools (MA)
- Chicago Public Schools (IL)
- Dallas Independent School District (TX)
- District of Columbia Public Schools (DC)
- Indian Prairie District 204 (IL)
- Kalamazoo Public Schools (MI)
- Miami-Dade County Schools (FL)
- Milford Public Schools (MA)
- Rochester Public Schools (MN)
- Waukegan Public Schools District 60 (IL)

As was the case with the activities of last year’s cohort, the Collaboration will keep its membership informed about the outcomes of this project through CollabNews and our member meetings.
While graduation rates for students with disabilities have improved, in reality, too many of these students continue to leave school and fail to graduate. Educational leaders know that our nation’s educational systems as a whole—and urban school districts in particular—can and must do better.

During the Collaborative’s Fall Meeting, participants will explore policies and practices implemented by Member School Districts at the classroom, school, and school district levels that have led to increases in school completion and graduation. Entitled “Clearing the Path to Graduation for Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools,” the meeting will be held in Charlotte, North Carolina, at the Westin Charlotte, October 27–30, 2010.

The Meeting’s keynote speaker will be Dr. Alexa Posny, who is currently Assistant Secretary of Education for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. As Assistant Secretary, Dr. Posny plays a pivotal role in policy and management issues affecting the conduct of programs and services to children, youth, and adults with disabilities across the country. Previously, Dr. Posny has also served as Commissioner of Education for the Kansas State Department of Education, the Director of Special Education for Kansas, and the Director of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Assistant Secretary Posny’s keynote address, followed by a question and answer session, is scheduled for the opening session of the Collaborative’s meeting on Thursday afternoon, October 28.

THE COLLABORATIVE EXTENDS A SPECIAL “THANK YOU” TO OUR CORPORATE PARTNERS FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT!
Building from the Ground Up

Superintendent of California Schools) is not just another new fad. LAUSD Chief Academic Officer Dr. Judy Elliott calls these and other early meetings that build interest and consensus “hanging hooks,” thus preparing school leaders for the real work of implementing RtI2.

What is LAUSD’s professional development model? The 2009–2010 school year brought no school district mandates, but rather an invitation for schools to participate in Cohort I and receive support in the form of five days of professional development and technical assistance. During these five days, school-based leadership teams, each composed of administrators, general and special education teachers, and a parent, learned to use the problem-solving process to match instruction and intervention to student need. There were only 159 schools in Cohort 1—not enough room for everyone, purposefully, but just the right number of schools that were ready and that our internal structures could support. Cohort 2 consisting of 200 schools will have 5-days of professional development during the fall of 2010, and Cohorts 3 and 4 will occur in the spring and fall of 2011, respectively.

In addition to professional development, to better meet the needs of the schools, we shifted the structure of the regional and central office. For example, special and general education leaders now collaborate with key staff from gifted, language acquisition for both English learners and Standard English learners, and parent and community services branches of the LAUSD organization. We also are in the process of fully integrating our policies and practices in attendance, attitude (behavior/social emotional), and academics to address the needs of the whole child. The use of common terms, a multi-tiered approach, and regular meeting time to build relationships and integrate the policy coming from different departments has been critical to our start-up. We are learning to get out of our “silos” and lead collaboratively in a way that supports schools in creating safe, healthy, respectful, and academically rigorous environments for every individual child.

The University of South Florida and Florida’s state-education agency staff have provided initial and ongoing support to LAUSD’s team charged with supporting schools to implement a multi-tiered framework. This has included conducting the initial training of school district leaders and support personnel, being available for ongoing technical conference calls, and sharing their professional development model and developed surveys. In partnership, LAUSD has laid out a multi-year plan of structure and support that includes a targeted focus on the needs of our diverse student population, the problem-solving process nested in a multi-tiered framework, maximization of academic engaged time, and improvement of our data systems. Last spring, LAUSD’s Teacher’s Hour television series premiered to showcase schools using effective and promising practices, and the Doing What Works website (www.lausd.net/rti) is constantly expanding to do the same.

This school year, our assessment infrastructure has grown beyond standards-based periodic assessments to include progress monitoring, diagnostics, and use of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) in elementary schools. We are in our second-year implementation of a full-scale data dashboard called MyData, which allows every teacher access to multiple measure and progress monitoring assessment data in academics, behavior (including electronic office discipline referral/suspensions), and attendance; LAUSD’s Family Module gives parents access to daily attendance, and potential classroom tests, assignments, and grades. We are also in our second year of a School Report Card that give parents and the community access to metrics that will help make school success transparent, and includes a School Experience Survey with parent, teacher, and student feedback on school...
cleanliness, safety, learning environment, and parent involvement.

Used to a culture of mandates and compliance, it was crucial for LAUSD to build this project as a grassroots effort. In lean budget times, schools have been given more choices, with more funding pushed out to schools rather than remaining centrally administered. Policies have been rewritten to give administrators the flexibility to make decisions for their students based on their data. Charters and Public School Choice has created an environment of healthy competition. Amidst it all, three intentional choices have put us on a path towards improvement:

• Start with schools and leaders that are excited to begin and share their learning
• Collaborate with other districts or agencies that are ahead in implementation and have seen success
• Bring all leaders, including teachers and parents, together to use, and truly understand, a common language

LAUSD is on the move. However, we are still cautious to not move too far in front of our schools, primarily so the central office can continue to support the work of the schools and so the work remains collaborative. We seek to strike a balance between establishing central district policy and creating a learning culture and environment that provides supports and coaching for improvement. By allowing more freedom for educational leaders to improve student outcomes, we are shifting from a culture of compliance to a culture of internal school accountability that adjusts to student need based on data and increasingly intensifies resources to ensure every child’s success.

Strategy 4: Go beyond the bake sale. Recruit parents for committees and task forces to address issues related to school completion, such as attendance committees, behavior task forces, and school climate committees. Parents are invaluable sources of information about possible causes of dropout as well as what types of strategies are likely to help families overcome barriers to ensure that students attend school every day, achieve every year, and attain their life goals over time. While national information can offer information about likely issues and solutions, gathering insights from the parents of your own community is essential to grounding your efforts in local realities.

Remember—if we engage students on all levels with school and learning, monitor student performance, follow up with students and families when warning signs of disengagement emerge, and focus on successful school completion for all students, it is possible to positively influence students toward the successful completion of school. Have a great year!

For more information, please visit www.ndpc-sd.org.

References


Over the past 10 years, those who have celebrated Inclusive Schools Week (ISW) have made a significant difference in the lives of children. Tens of thousands of families, students, and educators across the globe have marked Inclusive Schools Week by hosting events in their local school and communities, bringing information about inclusive education to local and state policymakers, incorporating inclusive practices into their work, and committing to provide an equitable and quality education to all children. An international dialogue on the importance of building and sustaining inclusive schools and communities has been resonating for a decade. Now is the time to turn words into action and make the changes that are vital to ensure that every child has access to schools that meet their education needs.

The 10th Annual Inclusive Schools Week will be celebrated December 6–10, 2010, in classrooms, schools, and communities throughout the world. Inclusive Schools Week (ISW) highlights and celebrates the progress schools have made in providing a supportive and quality education to all students, including those who are marginalized due to disability, gender, ethnicity, geography, and language. It also provides an important opportunity for educators, students, and families to discuss what else needs to be done to ensure that schools continue to improve their ability to successfully educate all children. ISW is sponsored by the Inclusive Schools Network (www.inclusiveschools.org).

This year’s theme “Awareness to Action: Celebrating 10 Years of Inclusive Schools Week” focuses on how schools can move forward in their journey toward excellence by following a path of reflection, planning, and action. The 10th Anniversary Celebration Kit contains the information, tools, and resources needed to plan a successful Inclusive Schools Week celebration and includes a wealth of new resources aimed at supporting schools in the process of becoming more inclusive. The 2010 Celebration Kit will be available in a fresh and reorganized print format, as well as on CD-ROM and in downloadable versions in early fall.

Inclusiveschools.org is the home of the Inclusive Schools Network and the place to find updated information about Inclusive Schools Week 2010 and to order new ISW products. Leading up to the ISW 2010 celebration, the website will have weekly postings of ideas, events, and resources to support schools in planning their ISW Celebration.

To learn more about the 10th Annual Inclusive Schools Week, visit www.inclusiveschools.org or contact Kristen Layton at nisw@edc.org.

NEW COLLABORATIVE MEMBERS

The Collaborative currently links 104 school districts from 32 states plus the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. Four school districts have joined since March 2010

Speed SEJA #802, IL
Hattiesburg School District, MS
Kent School District, WA
New York City Department of Education, NY

For a complete list of Collaborative members and enrollment information, please visit our Web site at www.urbancollaborative.org
The 2010 Inclusive Schools Week Celebration Kit and Promotional Products Are Now Available!

Enhance your Inclusive Schools Week celebration by ordering materials and promotional products that highlight your school’s dedication to being inclusive. All of your purchases help support the Inclusive Schools Network and its mission to support inclusive education worldwide.

2010 Celebration Kit

The 2010 Celebration Kit is available by download, CD Rom, or in our new and colorful Print Version. This year’s kit includes all of these exciting features:

- **“Moving From Awareness to Action”**: A feature activity that includes self assessments, planning guides, group activities, ideas and resources aimed at helping schools to get organized, motivated and ready to implement policies and practices that will support their move toward being more inclusive.
- **Celebration Ideas**: Fun and educational ideas for promoting inclusive strategies in the classroom, school and community at tiered levels of implementation.
- **Think Global**: Ideas for learning about and connecting with inclusive schools across the globe.
- **Inclusive Education Resources**: Web-based resources aimed at promoting inclusive practices.
- **Media Kit**: The tools you will need to promote Inclusive Schools Week in your community.
- **Celebration Tools**: Use these tools to plan your Inclusive Schools Week Celebration.

Inclusive Schools Week Promotional Products

Here are some ideas for incorporating ISW products into your 2010 Celebration:

- **Recognition Gifts**: Say thank you to teachers, students and others in the community.
- **Fundraising**: Buy materials in bulk and sell them during ISW to raise funds for school activities promoting inclusive practices.
- **Celebration Fun**: Pencils, stickers, bookmarks and other items create a festive atmosphere and make your celebration more fun!

Order your products today at www.inclusiveschools.org
ISN products are available for purchase online! Plan now for Inclusive Schools Week 2010, December 6-10, by using these items, including Celebration Kits, posters, pencils and much more, to promote your celebration and to raise awareness about inclusive educational practices throughout the year. ISN collaborates with the Federation for Children with Special Needs, who hosts the official online store for ISN products. To view these products, order online, or download a PDF order form, please visit our Products Page and Secure Online Order Form:

https://fcsn.org/inclusiveschools/orderform.html

Please visit our website for more information: www.inclusiveschools.org