Pittsburgh’s CITY Connections Expands to Provide a College Experience to Students with Disabilities

By Gayle Bair, CITY Connections Coordinator; Crystal Evans, Transition Coordinator
Pittsburgh Public Schools; and Dr. Kaye Cupples, Professor Point Park University

CITY Connections is a transition program within the Pittsburgh Public Schools offering continued education to students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) between the ages of 18 and 21. This unique opportunity provides community-based programming outside of a typical high school environment to students with moderate disabilities who have met their high school requirements but require further education to meet their IEP goals. Students attending CITY Connections continue their education in an urban, community-based environment and have many resources available to them within the City of Pittsburgh.

Outcomes and Goals

The theme that runs through all CITY Connections activities is quality of life, from planning services for students with disabilities to creating supports to enhance their participation in the community. The expression of this theme, and the philosophy that undergirds CITY Connections, is valued life outcomes, which include the following:

- Having a safe and stable home in which to live now and in the future
- Having access to a variety of places and engaging in meaningful activities
- Having a social network of personally meaningful relationships
- Having a level of personal choice and control that matches one’s age
- Being safe and healthy

In addition to valued life outcomes, CITY Connections is also defined and organized with a focus on adopted transition outcomes: postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living. Programming is centered on domestic skills development, functional academics, community access, consumerism, volunteerism, citizenship, and recreation/leisure. Skills embedded in the instruction include self-determination, social skills, communication, community travel, and health and safety. All students:

- Maintain a bank account and practice the exchange of money in real-life settings. The district provides each

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MEMBER PROFILE: Dr. Markay Winston

Dr. Markay Winston, formerly the Director for the Department of Student Services with the Cincinnati Public Schools, has just made a significant career transition. She left Cincinnati to take the position of Chief Officer of Instructional Learning Supports (Specialized Services) in the Chicago Public Schools, the third largest school system in the nation. Dr. Winston grew up in Ottumwa, Iowa, the home of the fictional character Radar O’Reilly from the TV series MASH. She began her career as a school psychologist with the Cincinnati Public Schools in 1990, after graduating from the University of Cincinnati, and became the Director of Student Services in 2002. The Collaborative’s Associate Director, Ron Felton, spoke with Dr. Winston as she was preparing for her move to the Windy City.

RON: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in our field during your career?

MARKAY: From my perspective, the most significant change I have seen in our field in recent years is that we as educators have been forced to look closely and critically at the delivery of quality instruction to students with disabilities. We are now having much more serious conversations with our general education colleagues about instructional methodology and materials and how we can improve the performance of all students. Now, students with disabilities matter—it matters how well we educate them and how we provide them with appropriate learning materials and instruction. This change has come about because school systems are being held accountable for outcomes for all their students. Previously, folks outside of special education were just not sufficiently concerned about the performance of students with disabilities, while those of us in special education spent a lot of time and energy on issues around procedural compliance. The focus on accountability has elevated the importance of what we are doing for these students. We are having inclusive conversations about the quality of instruction and the practices that can boost achievement for all students. We are being challenged to find innovative and promising practices that work.

RON: Have those conversations resulted in actions that have improved student performance?

MARKAY: Absolutely. I am seeing positive changes, although it is occurring in small pockets. It hasn’t gone to scale yet. Our challenge is to see how to take practices determined as effective and make sure all our students with disabilities have the opportunity to be exposed to high-quality curriculum and instruction. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards is providing a very exciting opportunity. We are looking at the implications of these standards for our diverse learners, and we want to make sure that students with disabilities are not left behind.

RON: How can we take this to “scale”?

MARKAY: The most important thing is systemic ownership. In many districts, the responsibility for the outcomes for students with disabilities continues to reside primarily in the departments of special education. Even though the conversations have gone beyond that, I don’t think we have made the shift in terms of who “owns” these students. Taking this to scale requires that all of us in the system take responsibility for all students and stop speaking within our departments about “our children,” “your children,” and “those children.” If we can’t do that, it will be close to impossible to bring it to scale. We have seen very good examples in Cincinnati of elevated instructional practice leading to benefits for all students, including those with disabilities. We need to put in place those same supports and structures in all schools so that we advance these successes across the system.

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SPRING MEETING RECAP

ELLs with Disabilities: Successes and Challenges

by Carrie Parker, Ed.D., Senior Research Scientist, Education Development Center, Inc.

The Collaborative’s Spring 2012 Meeting focused on addressing the needs of English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities. Through small-group gatherings, plenary sessions with national leaders, and concurrent presentations from nine member school districts, the 170 attendees from 57 Collaborative Member school districts shared challenges, strategies, and expertise about working with this growing population of students.

During the Thursday morning size-alike session, participants from small, medium, and large size member districts shared their perspectives on three areas: (1) issues to consider in identifying disabilities among English language learners (ELLs), (2) the service delivery models in place for ELLs with disabilities, and (3) the challenges school districts face in meeting the needs of these students.

Among the diverse responses shared, a few themes emerged. When identifying disabilities among ELLs, the consensus was that the critical issue is figuring out how to distinguish language acquisition from learning disabilities. Participants raised five points regarding the use of assessments, professional development, collaboration, cultural relevance, and the role of Response to Intervention (RTI).

• Diagnostic assessments may not be valid assessments for ELLs, even when administered in the student’s native language.

• There is an ongoing need for professional development for all teachers, as well as psychologists and guidance counselors.

• Collaboration is key, both in terms of having all teachers teach all students and in building a common language among general education teachers, special education teachers, and ELL teachers.

• Issues of cultural competence, including prioritizing effective communication with parents and families and understanding each student’s background, are essential to avoiding mis-identification of disabilities.

• Implementing an RTI model can potentially change the identification process by providing quality instruction, with differentiated interventions that include a focus on English language acquisition.

When asked to describe service delivery for ELLs who have been identified with disabilities, participants described a diverse array of models, some of which were similar to those for native English students with disabilities and some specific to ELLs.

The challenges school districts face in meeting the needs of ELLs with disabilities reflect the priorities participants described with regard to the identification process. Thus, finding and funding qualified staff emerged as a critical challenge, as a diverse continued on page 5
MEMBER PROFILE: Dr. Markay Winston

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RON: What changes have occurred at the central office in how special education interfaces with other departments?

MARKAY: Out of necessity, we are all working differently. The walls and barriers that have existed for so long between disciplines and departments have started to come down. No, we are not having all the conversations we should be having among colleagues, and yes, the silos still exist. From time to time, particularly around the implementation of the Common Core, I have to knock on doors and say, “Remember us? We need to be part of this conversation.” I am pleased that this past year General and Special Education came together to begin looking at the Common Core State Standards and their implications for students with disabilities. We had some really rich conversations. With all the good and bad that have been associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), one positive result is that it has changed the nature of our conversations—the quality of education for students with disabilities is on the table for discussion. I don’t think this would have happened without NCLB.

RON: Where do you see the field headed in the next decade?

MARKAY: I see an expansion of co-teaching strategies as well as the application of the principles of Universal Design for Learning. Although UDL has been around for a while, it really hasn’t caught fire and was not often discussed outside of special education staffing and in the process of IEP development. Our colleagues in the Curriculum Department have now become more receptive to UDL, and I can foresee them taking the lead in that regard.

As for the administration of special education programs, I have heard a lot about a shift in emphasis away from procedural compliance towards accountability for outcomes. So far, I am not yet seeing much visible evidence of this from the state or the federal government. As administrators, we continue to struggle with maintaining a balance between the work we do that is primarily focused on compliance and that which is centered on improving instruction and access to the curriculum. Compliance will always be an important part of the work we do, but you can be 100 percent in compliance and have students who are not learning. However, compliance that is linked to improved instruction and better outcomes is beneficial. We still feel the pressure to focus on the compliance piece. We can help by putting some good monitoring tools in place and making them available to schools through our data systems. In this way we can reduce some of the pressure on special education staff and allow them to focus more on instructional support. To do this, we need to bring together the talents of our Special Education support staff, who have focused on procedural compliance for so long, and those of our support folks in Curriculum and Instruction.

In the future, I see the blending of Special Education and Curriculum and Instruction, with staff working side by side in a close partnership focused on improving instruction.

RON: We have recently seen in the news new and discouraging data regarding the seemingly intractable issue of disproportionality in the use of suspensions and expulsions, particularly among African American students. The data are even more troublesome when we look at African American students with disabilities. How can we tackle this problem?

MARKAY: This is an issue that I often worry about. I think the solution lies in dealing with the ownership issue that I spoke about previously. Special Education and Student Services cannot own this problem—we are not the ones suspending them. The system as a whole has to own it and look at what supports are needed to keep students in school. We need to look at how we are using our data to help us tackle this. We have lots of data and sophisticated data systems but having data and using it to be proactive in resolving issues around discipline are two different things. In Cincinnati, we have a initiative called “Positive School Culture,” which is based on Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS), and we have developed alternatives to suspension and expulsion. Our entire Code of Student Conduct incorporates the principles of PBS. I am pleased to say that we do not have issues of disproportionality relative to discipline or placement in special education.

RON: What are your thoughts about the work that awaits you in the Chicago Public Schools?

MARKAY: I am incredibly impressed with the work they have begun in Chicago, and the CEO has a phenomenal vision for where he wants to take the school system. I know there is much work to do and look forward to being part of the team, and I want to contribute to the effort by making sure that the needs of diverse learners are part of the discussion as new initiatives are developed. What I like about my new title—Chief Officer of Instructional Learning Supports—is that it focuses on how we can support instruction and deliver a high-quality curriculum to all students. That’s really what it is all about.
set of qualifications are needed. Other challenges included:

- Formalizing collaboration at both the school and district levels to meet the needs of students
- Addressing issues of scheduling, time limitations, and staff expertise to provide each student with the appropriate instruction and services (in whatever language meets the student needs)
- Improving communication with parents

Additionally, meeting participants identified extensive professional development goals:

- Help professionals understand why students—including those with disabilities—should have access to an array of language pathways
- Enhance the expertise of all teachers to meet the needs of ELLs with disabilities (including the use of Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol or SIOP)
- Communicate that being an English learner is not a disability
- Assist teachers develop guidance questions to make better instructional and intervention decisions

Thursday afternoon was dedicated to plenary sessions. Keynote speaker Jeannette Klingner, Professor of Education at the University of Colorado-Boulder, presented multiple ways to help participants “demystify” the process of distinguishing learning disabilities from the language acquisition process. First and foremost, she emphasized that there is no single test that will definitively determine if a student has a learning disability. As with all students who are struggling, she advocates using an ecological framework that collects student information from as many sources as possible, with diagnostic assessments being just one piece of gathered documentation. Other sources of information include student background, classroom observations, identifying what the student can do rather than just what she or he cannot do, comparisons to peers, and involving the child’s parents. She also noted that it must be clear that the student has had access to appropriate instruction, and recommended that any process should begin by assuming that nothing is wrong with the student, and the systemic factors are the issue. Finally, she talked about the importance of identifying the best language for instruction for the student (which can change over time).

When using the ecological model for determining disability, Dr. Klingner noted that a number of similarities exist between language behaviors associated with learning disabilities and language behaviors associated with learning a second language, and understanding the similarities can help to avoid mis-identification. These can include difficulty following directions and being slow to process challenging language. In addition, some characteristics may look the same but be slightly different, such as difficulty with phonological awareness for students with learning disabilities and confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when different than in the student’s first language for ELLs. Dr. Klingner also identified critical characteristics of services for ELLs who have been identified with disabilities: Services should be tailored to the individual student; they should be provided in the least restrictive environment, preferably the general education classroom; they should include English language instruction; they should be culturally and linguistically responsive; and they should use research-based interventions.

On Friday, leaders from nine Collaborative Member school districts presented in concurrent sessions on their work with ELLs.
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student with a $40 stipend check each month. With teacher support, students open a bank account. Stipend money may be used to purchase items needed for work, community-based activities, transportation and other program-related expenses. Participate in travel training to access the wide variety of community locations and recreational opportunities available in the Pittsburgh area.

- Work in a variety of settings and volunteer in the community on a regular basis

A team works with each student to connect the young adult to the agencies and resources that will support his or her success in adult life outside of the school setting. Team members may include the following: CITY Connections program coordinator, special education teacher, student, parent/guardian, other family members, paraprofessional, transition coordinator, travel trainer, community agency personnel, related service personnel, employment specialist, and anyone else the student chooses to invite. In addition, community agency partners are critical to CITY Connections. They provide a variety of services, such as vocational evaluation, facility-based training, and job development and coaching. It is the goal of CITY Connections that upon exiting the program, students are prepared to live, work, connect, and contribute in their communities.

From the City to Community College

CITY Connections opened its first apartment site in 2002 and today operates four apartment sites within the city of Pittsburgh. The School District of Pittsburgh pays rent to each site on a monthly basis. Students do not live in the apartments. Rather, they maintain them by learning and practicing a variety of daily living skills: cooking breakfast and lunch, cleaning, generating a grocery list and shopping, and other household responsibilities.

In 2005, CITY Connections moved onto the campus of the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC). This community college site offers students the opportunity to eat lunch in the campus cafeteria, join campus clubs and organizations, and participate in college classes for credit. Due to liability concerns, CCAC requires students to be on a roster, therefore students are unable to audit classes for non-credit at this campus. However, students who are enrolled and taking classes for credit may receive academic support from the CITY Connections teacher, classroom assistant and Supportive Services Department at the college.

The move to an apartment or college campus creates a more natural, age-appropriate setting for CITY Connections students, providing access to real work and real-life experiences in the community. It also mirrors the progress of their same-age peers as they move beyond high school.

Expanding to a University Setting

In the fall of 2012, CITY Connections will open its new site at Point Park University, which is a comprehensive university with a strong liberal arts tradition. Located in the heart of Downtown Pittsburgh, Point Park currently enrolls 3,920 full- and part-time students in 87 undergraduate programs and 13 graduate programs, with students representing 46 states and 36 countries.

In addition to the other components of the CITY Connections program, this new university project will afford students the opportunity to audit classes in areas of interest. Students will be fully immersed in campus culture and will have complete access to college facilities. The downtown location is ideal for rich, community-based instructional experiences using public transportation, while also providing students with access to many facilities within walking distance. University students studying for careers in education will complete their field experiences in the CITY Connections program, serving as mentors to the CITY Connections students.

Planning for the university expansion began in 2011, and collaboration has been ongoing between Point Park faculty and the Pittsburgh Public Schools special education administration and staff. The school district and the university have
 Continued from page 5 - ELLs with Disabilities...

worked jointly to address programming details, including site location, furniture, equipment, supplies, parking, staffing, meal plans, transportation, student population, and transportation.

The Point Park University site is scheduled to open with 12 students during the fall semester of 2012. This first class will be a heterogeneous group and include students with a wide range of disabilities. As with the students at CCAC, the CITY Connections students at Point Park will have a team of professionals to assist them as they experience life on a university campus and expand their horizons.

**Resources**


**For more information about**

Spring Meeting presentations, please visit [http://www.urbancollaborative.org/calendar/spring-2012-member-meeting](http://www.urbancollaborative.org/calendar/spring-2012-member-meeting).


Beth Martin, ESL Itinerant Support Teacher in Cincinnati Public Schools, presents a concurrent session to our meeting participants.
Collaborative Members and Associates will be gathering in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 24th – 27th for the organization’s Fall 2012 Member Meeting. The primary topical focus for this meeting is “Common, Meet Diverse: The Challenges of the Common Core State Standards for Students with Disabilities.”

The intent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is to provide more clarity about and create consistency in what is expected of student learning from state to state, and to present a clear and coherent framework to prepare students for college and the workforce. Thus far, all but five states across the nation have adopted the Standards. At this year’s Fall Meeting, participants will be exploring and discussing the implications of the CCSS as these presume to assist students with and without disabilities in becoming college and career ready, and examining the policy and practice changes that will be required in order to ensure that students with mild to severe disabilities benefit from CCSS.

Helping participants explore this topic will be two highly regarded educators, Dr. Brian McNulty and Ms. Rachel Quenemoen. Dr. McNulty is currently the Vice President for Leadership Development at the Leadership and Learning Center. An author of more than 40 publications, his most recent books include, Leaders Make It Happen with Laura Besser, and School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results, a best-selling publication co-authored with Robert Marzano and Tim Waters. He is the former Assistant Commissioner of Education for the Colorado Department of Education where, among other duties, he was responsible for special education, and has had extensive experience in working with school districts and state education agencies across the country.

Ms. Quenemoen is a Senior Research Fellow with the National Center on Educational Outcomes. She conducts research and provides technical assistance on educational change processes in order to ensure that students with disabilities are included in and benefit from reform efforts. She has worked to support states in the development of inclusive assessment and accountability systems, and co-authored one of the foundational books on alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. She now directs the National Center and State Collaborative, one of the national consortia developing assessments aligned to the CCSS.

As with all Collaborative meetings, the Fall 2012 Member Meeting will provide many opportunities for participants to network with one another and share emerging best practices. Optional pre-meeting sessions – a consultancy session with leaders from the Pittsburgh Public Schools, a “size-alike” session, and Corporate Partner focus groups – are planned for that Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning.

For more information about the Fall Meeting, please visit the Collaborative’s website at www.urbancollaborative.org.
We are pleased to announce the following FREE webinar…

**STAYING THE COURSE**

*Presenter:*
**Ms. Robin J. Morrison**
Instructional Supervisor
Clinical Behavioral Services
Miami-Dade County Public Schools

*Date:* Thursday, November 15, 2012  
*Time:* 12:00 noon – 1:30 pm EST

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Exceptional Solutions for Exceptional Students
As states across the nation announced their adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the Collaborative provided Spring Meeting participants with an opportunity to grapple with what this shift would mean for their school districts, their teachers, and ultimately their students. The Collaborative’s Spring 2012 meeting in Tampa ended with a plenary session entitled The Challenges of the Common Core State Standards for Students with Disabilities. The Collaborative’s assistant director, Dr. Claudia Rinaldi, gave a brief presentation on the history, rationale, and expectations laid out in the CCSS. After Dr. Rinaldi’s presentation, participants were introduced to the World Café, a protocol for hosting large-group dialogues. The World Café process is structured so that participants divide into smaller groups and engage in three or more 20-minute rounds of conversation.

Following are the four questions members explored during the World Café session and a few of the ideas that surfaced during those conversations.

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CCSS the Focus of Collaborative’s World Café

What will the CCSS mean for educators—at both district and school levels—who work with students with disabilities?

• Increased collaboration across district departments among general and special education teachers and teachers of English language learners
• Alignment between CCSS and assessments and the hope that CCSS will lead to more authentic and meaningful assessments
• Higher expectations and rigor for all students
• Increased access and opportunities for all students
• IEPs that are aligned with the CCSS
• Opportunities for reflection and professional development that will help teachers better understand CCSS and meet the expectations outlined in the Standards
• Strengthening the work of teachers
• Data-driven instruction

One of the most demanding aspects of CCSS is complexity of texts. What will this mean for students with disabilities and English language learners who are having difficulty with existing standards?

• Expansion of inclusive practices
• Scaffolding for English language learners
• More strategic and increased use of assistive technology and differentiated instruction
• Clearer methods to determine student comprehension in order to inform and guide instruction
• Targeted interventions based on students’ skills and goals

In order for students with disabilities to meet the high academic standards of
the CCSS, what additional supports and accommodations do you think will be necessary for students in your district? What do you foresee as the barriers to those supports and accommodations?

**Support:** Quality teachers in both general and special education

**Barrier:** Difficulty in removing ineffective teachers

**Support:** Technology

**Barriers:**
- Ineffective use of technology
- Over-reliance on technology
- Inequity in access to technology
- Rapidly changing nature of technology

**Support:** Broad set of accommodations and the ability of teachers to identify the appropriate ones and match them to student needs

**Barriers:**
- Lack of common planning time for teachers
- Inequities in availability of supports
- Lack of guidance on best practices
- Need for more reflection on practice
- Lack of guidance on evidence-based practices related to accommodations and scaffolding

Given that Response to Intervention (RTI)/Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS) models are being implemented increasingly across the Nation, what do you see as the nexus between CCSS and the RTI/MTSS model in your district/school?

- Data
- Universal Design for Learning
- Professional development
- Messaging from central offices, school leaders, and teachers
- Cross-department collaboration
- Early intervention

While World Café participants expressed excitement about the shift toward the CCSS, they also raised concerns, including increased pressure on teachers; limited resources; and the fear that districts will miss the mark with regard to aligning scheduling, curriculum, RTI models, the IEP process, and assessments of both teachers and students. Participants expressed interest in continuing these conversations as they returned to their districts, and the Collaborative will continue this timely conversation at the Fall 2012 meeting, Common, Meet Diverse: The Challenges of the Common Core State Standards for Students with Disabilities, where presentations will shed light on how member school districts are transitioning to the CCSS.

For more information on the history, rationale, and expectations laid out in the CCSS and Dr. Rinaldi’s full presentation, go to the Collaborative’s website at www.urbancollaborative.org and click on Spring 2012 Meeting Presentations.

To learn more about the World Café protocol, visit http://www.theworldcafe.com/.

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Minneapolis Public Schools, MN

School District of Palm Beach County, FL

For a complete list of Collaborative members and enrollment information, please visit our website at www.urbancollaborative.org