Shaping an Urban Research Agenda

The topic for the spring meeting of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative was chosen on the premise that its more than 150 members currently at work in 78 urban school districts should have a real opportunity to shape the government’s research agenda.

“Our focus rests heavily on finding funding for programming and classroom materials, but understanding and influencing the research is another essential component of what we all can do to improve our urban schools,” said Collaborative Director David Riley to describe the importance of convening a meeting on the topic of “Research to Practice.”

Louis Danielson, Director of the Research to Practice Division of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provided the keynote address. The May 3 address included a presentation of OSEP’s current research agenda. Developed with input from researchers and practitioners in the field, it focuses on the following five priority areas:

- Students with disabilities’ access to, participation in, and progress in the general education curriculum;
- Improving results in early childhood for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities and their families through interventions, supports, and services;
- Standards-based reform and students with disabilities;
- Students with disabilities’ secondary education, transition, and employment;
- Positive behavioral interventions, social/emotional, and life skills supports and services for students with disabilities.

Dr. Danielson’s presentation of these issues provided a launching point for a discussion of whether this agenda addresses the needs...
Tom Hehir, Senior Policy Advisor

A must read for all urban special education directors is a chapter in a new book, *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*, published by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. In their chapter, “Rethinking Learning Disabilities,” G. Reid Lyon and a distinguished group of colleagues have synthesized the research on early intervention for students with reading disabilities, examined the literature on remediation, and provided a thoughtful critique of current policies and practices. This chapter, in particular, is a must read not only for the important research it brings to bear on the problems involved with learning disabilities (LD) identification and treatment, but also because its main author is an advisor to President George W. Bush. This piece may very well have more “juice” behind it than your average research synthesis.

A fundamental point of the chapter is that many students who are identified as LD might not have developed reading-related difficulties if they had received appropriate interventions in kindergarten and the primary grades. This assertion is based on years of high-quality research conducted under Dr. Lyon’s supervision at the National Institutes of Health. This research demonstrated that roughly 18% of children experienced significant early reading difficulty. Further, well-structured early interventions with an emphasis on phonemic awareness can greatly reduce the number of those students who experience persistent reading difficulty. Intervention studies have shown that only a relatively small number of students (1.4% to 5.4% depending on the study) do not respond to these interventions. Given this finding, the authors rightly condemn current practices associated with LD; specifically, allowing children to struggle with reading in the primary grades before providing interventions. This practice, largely driven by the discrepancy definition of LD, virtually guarantees that students will be inappropriately identified as LD and, more importantly, as time goes by decreases the likelihood these children will become proficient readers.

The authors go on to propose some rather sweeping changes to policy and practice. It is noteworthy that they identify the solution to this problem as largely a regular education issue with special education playing a supportive role. How many of us who have worked to implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in cities have decried the inappropriate referrals we have seen that are a result of poor instruction—not disability? Given the prevalence of early reading difficulties in young children, the authors argue that early intensive intervention for students experiencing early reading difficulty become an integral part of K-3 education. They emphasize that these kids are easy to identify and, the longer we wait, the greater likelihood that these children will develop into disabled readers. This is not to say that all children will become facile readers with these interventions. There are children who have deep-seated problems with reading who do not respond fully to interventions and who will likely need significant support throughout their school careers. However, these students do benefit from the interventions though maybe not as dramatically as some of their peers. An important point these authors make is that, unless we get a handle on the early reading issue, we will not have resources to support those who truly have LD.

As standards-based reform progresses, it is becoming clearer and clearer that most kids with LD are struggling. Many need more, not less support. This cannot happen if our special education systems are overwhelmed with inappropriate referrals.

On the policy level, the authors seek substantive, far-reaching change. They call for the abandonment of the IQ/discrepancy model for determining the existence of LD and seek an identification system that would require the implementation of interventions before identification. They further argue against the current exclusionary aspect of the federal LD definition (i.e., that LD is not the result of other conditions that impede learning such as inadequate instructional opportunities or cultural issues). They argue that the brain and
NAESP Publishes IDEA Guide for Principals

_In our district, we don’t have regular education children and special education children. We just have children!_

Greg Robinson, Associate Superintendent, Urbandale, IA

For more than two decades, principals have been attempting to meet both the intent and the spirit of federal law as it relates to educating children with disabilities. This holds true in the context of implementing the new provisions set forth in the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its 1999 regulations.

To provide guidance on ensuring quality special education services and early intervention to building principals in elementary and middle schools, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)—in collaboration with the IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators Partnership (ILIAD) project to which the Collaborative serves as a partner—developed standards of excellence that directly relate to the principal’s role in implementing IDEA, which have been published in a new booklet, *Implementing IDEA: A Guide for Principals*. Along with the standards are guidelines principals may use when assessing themselves and their school community. It is intended that the standards and guidelines be used by principals to assess quality practices and guide program improvement.

About the Standards and Guidelines
The standards and guidelines for the provision of special education, related services, and early intervention are organized around the same categories identified as the project infrastructure and establishing a networking system. In January, LASER hosted its first grant writing workshop in Tampa, Florida for eight faculty from minority institutions and plans are underway to host the second workshop in August at Florida A&M University. The summer workshop will target 15 faculty and doctoral students who are interested in submitting quality research proposals for funding. LASER assists in this effort by not only hosting workshops but by also providing seasoned research mentors to guide workshop participants.

This fall, a cohort of ten doctoral students will matriculate into the urban special education doctoral program at USF. LASER is ecstatic to have five of its own scholars in this cohort. Admitting scholars from diverse backgrounds is a vital

Building the Capacity of Faculty and Grad Students at Minority Institutions

**Brenda Townsend, Project Director, Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources (LASER)**

As announced in the previous edition of *Urban Perspectives*, the University of South Florida (USF) was awarded the Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources (LASER) project to address the need for a national research agenda on urban special education. We are pleased to have the Collaborative as our partner.

This first year has focused on developing the project infrastructure and establishing a networking system. In January, LASER hosted its first grant writing workshop in Tampa, Florida for eight faculty from

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Establishing Successful Partnerships with External Technical Assistance Providers

Judith Zorfass, Senior Director of Strategic Planning & C.G. Shaffer, Project Director, LINK•US

Imagine that your urban school district is working with an external technical assistance (TA) provider or consultant. The goal of your joint effort is to ensure that students with disabilities use a range of technology tools to access the general education curriculum, participate, and succeed according to local, state, and national standards. Perhaps a federally- or state-funded project invited your district to participate or maybe your district chose to contract with a consultant or an external TA provider to meet your needs. What makes this relationship between your urban school district and an external TA provider productive, successful, and worthwhile? This is just one question being studied by LINK•US, Linking Urban Schools with Information and Support around special education and technology.

LINK•US: Background
Housed at the Education Development Center and funded by the Office of Special Education Programs from 1997-2002, the LINK•US Project has two missions. First, the project provides technical assistance and professional development (TA/PD) by implementing a model that has evolved over the past four years. Secondly, as researchers, we study the TA/PD process in order to produce a historical record of this work, identify impact, and distill lessons learned. Audiences for the lessons learned are future funders, other TA providers, and urban school districts who work with external change agents.

The purpose of this article is to share four critical elements that identify how urban districts can build stronger and more effective collaborative relationships with external TA/PD providers. We draw on our ongoing work with two school districts: Boston Public Schools—a member of the Collaborative—and New York City Community School District #15.

Four Critical Elements

#1: Alignment
A focused effort must find an authentic home within the district’s key initiatives. External TA providers have defined areas of content expertise. For LINK•US, the area of expertise centers on integrating technology into the general education curriculum to benefit all students, especially those with disabilities. From the outset, the assumption is that this area of expertise matches a need identified by district administrators—otherwise there would be no motivation to form an internal-external partnership. An initiative such as integrating technology into the curriculum cannot be an isolated endeavor or “just another mandate.” Rather, it must be seen as having the power to improve, enhance, deepen, and/or expand current or future initiatives that have full district backing. Given our focus in LINK•US, we seek to embed our work in district initiatives designed to meet the requirements of the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA ’97), support technology roll-out and integration programs, and strengthen curriculum-based and standards-based reform efforts.

#2: Co-Construct Strands of Professional Development Work
Designated school leaders (e.g., administrators, facilitators, and staff developers) need to work as collaborative partners with external TA providers to plan and implement strands of professional development activities. A strand is designed to address a long-term goal to improve student outcomes. For example in New York, it was integrating a range of technology tools into the pre-K curriculum to support students’ language and literacy development. In Boston, it was Looking at Student Work (LASW) as part of a whole school change reform effort. To meet its goal, a strand involves a carefully planned combination of effective professional development strategies over time—workshops, study groups, tutorials, in class technical assistance, and looking at student work.
An initiative such as integrating technology into the curriculum cannot be an isolated endeavor or ‘just another mandate.’ Rather, it must be seen as having the power to improve, enhance, deepen and/or expand current or future initiatives that have full district backing.

#3: Responsibility for Follow-up Support
To ensure that teachers apply and use new information, the district needs to intentionally provide support. Even if they visit on a regular basis, external TA providers do not live and work within the district. They are not there the day after a workshop or a meeting to help teachers translate new knowledge into practice. There must be a plan developed within the district to support teachers’ efforts.

This is particularly critical when the TA/PD focuses on integrating technology into the curriculum. Teachers need ongoing assistance from the district’s technology specialists, curriculum experts, and special educators. For example, technology coordinators need to make sure that participating teachers have access to the necessary technology tools. In Boston, school-based teams purchased “low-tech” tools for trial and use by teachers as they implemented new instructional strategies with their students. Although this seems obvious when the initiative focuses on technology, we have found that teachers participating in workshops that focus on integrating a particular piece of software into the curriculum often lack access to both the hardware and the software for practice and later use. Technology staff also needs to make sure that teachers have access to technical help to fix broken computers, printers, and other equipment. Curriculum specialists (e.g., literacy coaches) need to help teachers see how they can integrate technology tools into the curriculum (i.e., how the tools enhance solid teaching strategies). Special education teachers and specialists also have a role to play in helping teachers choose, use, and evaluate tools that support accessibility. Administrators need to make sure that their budget includes funds for printer cartridges, printer paper, and disks. Lack of such basic supplies can bring technology integration to a halt.

#4: Collaborate on Formative and Summative Evaluation
It is important for both leaders in the district and the TA provider to engage in ongoing reflection about what is being learned through evaluation and to act on these lessons. Ongoing formative evaluation identifies what is and is not working in jointly developed TA/PD efforts. This knowledge enables all involved to make mid-course corrections to strengthen the work. Summative evaluation helps to determine if the work has had an impact on administrators, specialists, teachers, and most importantly, students. Collaborating ensures that the evaluation relates to both the district’s and the TA provider’s goals, data collection strategies and measures, analysis strategies, and a dissemination plan. We have learned (sometimes the hard way) that there is little value in finding ways to make improvements if we do not use the information from our evaluation.

The Future of LINK•US
We are approaching the fifth and final year of the LINK•US project. During this time, we will be applying what we are learning to another school district, Albuquerque, New Mexico. We will also be developing a Web site that will include our TA model, present cases and vignettes illustrating how we worked with school districts, and offer a set of lessons learned to guide school districts and technical assistance providers as they carry out similar important work.

For more information about LINK•US, please contact jzorfas@edc.org.
An Urban Research Agenda

of students with disabilities in urban schools. Collaborative Assistant Director Jeri Muoio questioned, “What are the issues you are facing in your districts? Do these need to be tweaked to address those concerns?”

Although participants overwhelmingly agreed that the OSEP agenda is relevant to them, as a group they identified a list of research questions that they believe are critical to improving the outcomes of all children, which have been compiled and forwarded in a letter to Dr. Danielson.

Research Issues Critical to Urban Schools

In the interest of further highlighting OSEP’s commitment to bridging the research-to-practice chasm that exists most particularly in urban school districts, the Collaborative proposed that OSEP:

- Target a focused research and professional development agenda dedicated specifically to improving outcomes for students with disabilities in urban schools
- Develop a priority to identify effective models of interagency collaboration that have resulted in improved outcomes for students with disabilities with severe emotional disturbance, who are medically fragile, and those youth who are transitioning from juvenile detention; such a priority would support and promote agency coalitions to serve our most challenged and challenging students, and their families

Among those research questions Collaborative members determined to be of the highest importance were:

- What constellation of policies best promotes improved academic and vocational outcomes as well as reduced drop out rates for students with disabilities in urban schools?
- What are the characteristics of preschool programs that are most likely to lead to better educational outcomes for students with disabilities in urban schools?
- What programs, services, and/or supports are resulting in improved outcomes as well as reduced dropout rates for students with disabilities in urban schools?
- Are students with disabilities in urban schools gaining access to vocational programs that result in their (a) ability to obtain employment at above the minimum wage and (b) developing transferable skills? If so, what are the characteristics of these programs (i.e., where are the “beacons of excellence” in vocational education)?
- What are the characteristics of a culturally competent and responsive whole school behavior support system?

Finally, and understanding that the National Research Council has just issued its report on autism, the Collaborative...
stated its support for further research on the efficacy of the Council’s recommendations, particularly with regard to the impact of these recommendations on students with autism in urban schools.

The Collaborative’s letter to Dr. Danielson also reiterated the point that its members must be confident that all OSEP-funded research is culturally competent, respecting the increased diversity of our cities and our nation. “It is only with such assurance that the knowledge generated from the research will be useful to all educators, and to all students,” the letter said.

A Unique Opportunity

“I don’t think a group such as the Collaborative has ever been given an opportunity like this before,” began Tom Hehir, the Collaborative’s Senior Policy Advisor, as he offered members an insider’s view of what they could expect to gain from this meeting’s endeavor to reach the government. “The entire IDEA ’97 development process attempted to include a much more public voice for research from those in the field,” stated Hehir, who was a former director of OSEP in the Clinton administration.

Reinforcing what Danielson had said earlier, Hehir explained that funding for research in the area of special education is about $150 million, which is “not a lot relative to the need.”

“I would advocate for the research pie to grow quite significantly….” Hehir stated.

As a result of limited funding, not all Collaborative concerns could be addressed through research. “However, formation of strong, searchableable questions that are conveyed as impacting the education of all children in urban schools would attract the Department of Education’s attention,” Hehir further explained.

Influencing the federal government to focus on a half-dozen or so issues most relevant to urban educators, the Collaborative would be making a substantial contribution to the special education research agenda—one that will, as Collaborative Associate Director Ingrid Draper put it, “drive what happens in the next decade.”

For many participants, having their input in the area of research sought and heard was a first-time experience. One stated on her meeting evaluation: “It was empowering to know that participants had the extraordinary opportunity to influence the direction of research in the area of special education at a national level.” Another reiterated more simply just what the Collaborative staff was hoping to achieve: “This meeting helped reinforce the potential impact the Collaborative can have on a national agenda.”

For more information, please visit the Collaborative’s Web site: www.urbancollaborative.org.

For more information, please visit the Collaborative’s Web site: www.urbancollaborative.org.
The Policy/Parent Gap

Phil Ferguson, Co-Director, National Institute for Urban School Improvement

Ever since Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and found his followers having a party, people have noticed a fairly frequent gap between formal policies and actual practice. What we do and what we say we do are almost never totally the same thing. Certainly, this policy/practice gap is as noticeable in urban school systems as any other complex social organizations, and can be found in almost any area of activity. However, there is probably no area where the rhetoric and the reality are so far apart as in the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms. Despite official national and state education policies (embodied in laws, regulations, and court decisions) supporting inclusive education for students with disabilities, access to the general curriculum, and a massive commitment of public funds, data from the Department of Education shows that urban schools consistently place such students in more segregated settings for greater parts of the day and year than do school systems generally.

Why is this? That is perhaps the central question guiding the efforts of the National Institute on Urban School Improvement for the last four years. As with most such fundamental questions, there have been lots of answers proposed that are simple, clear, . . . and wrong. Or at least, incomplete. Certainly adequate resources are essential. So are reasonable class sizes and effective staff development. Even more important are the complicated, time-consuming, envelope-pushing approaches that go beyond the type of one-child-at-a-time “fixes” (unintentionally perpetuated by special education) to embed inclusion within large schoolwide restructuring initiatives. However, one of the key elements in explaining this gap between inclusive policies and separative practices has been a striking lack of support by the families involved. At least when it comes to support for inclusion in urban schools, a third “p” must be added. We must understand the whys and wherefores of “the policy/parent gap” as well as “the policy/practice gap.” Why do parents and other family members of urban students with and without disabilities silently acquiesce to—or even loudly defend—a segregative system of self-contained classrooms and schools that would never be tolerated with other types of diversity?

To help us start to answer this question, and simply to understand more fully how urban families thought about disability and special education, we conducted a series of focus group interviews with parents from Denver, CO and Washington, DC. Half of the groups were comprised of parents of children with disabilities and half without. The groups were balanced along lines of race and ethnicity, and the interviews were conducted by a social marketing research firm experienced with such research. (The details of the methodology will be included in the full publication of our analysis.) We are now in the process of analyzing what the parents told us. The interviews are as rich and complex as are families in general. I can only hint at a few points of interest here. However, my larger point is that schools and districts must find ways to collect this type of “thick” information about the families of their students if they ever hope to close the policy/parent gap (on inclusion or any other issue for that matter). Relying on the opinions of the small percentage of activist parents who serve on the committees, volunteer in the classrooms, and are in regular contact with teachers and administrators will never be enough. If our goal is to communicate effectively about why and how an initiative as complex and controversial as inclusion makes sense for kids with and without disabilities, then we must learn a lot more about how parents are interpreting what we are trying to say and do.
So, what did our focus group families tell us that was surprising or new? Let me just quickly mention two of the themes that impressed me as ones that we need to address more effectively.

1) **The “Opie Factor”**
   
   When asked to react to a general description of inclusive education, one parent didn’t mince words in his assessment that it wouldn’t work in an urban setting. “I mean if you are in Mayberry RFD, then yes. Opie and his three friends.” Inclusion, to this parent (and he was echoed by several others), seemed just one more unrealistic vision of “white guys in ties” trying to transport social experiments from suburban and rural contexts to the mean streets of the city. If the range of children we are talking about is Opie and his three friends, then maybe inclusion is worth trying, but not in the underfunded, overcrowded urban classrooms that are stretched to the limit with the kids already there.

For those of us advocating inclusion, this concern must be faced and addressed more directly. Is inclusion just a nice social experiment for the predominantly white, upper middle class? An educational frill that betrays an ignorance of what city schools must deal with on a daily basis? If not, if we think inclusion is part of good educational practice that is even more essential to urban education than elsewhere, then how do we shape our message to get that point across? If we think that inclusion is a central part of helping diverse learners succeed in school, regardless of race, class, gender, or disability, then how do we convey that to a skeptical public?

2) **Being different, and being in special education**

   I was struck by how many of the parents we heard from made a distinction between “being disabled” and “being in special education.” Indeed, several parents added a third group who “needed extra help,” but were neither disabled or in need of special education. The logic became almost irrefutable. If a child stayed in the regular class, but received some extra help for reading or math, that was not special education, and the child was not disabled. If the child was “in special education,” then that meant by definition that the child could not succeed in the regular classroom. Given such definitions, then inclusion is almost unavoidably seen by parents as an inexplicable effort by educators to put children in a setting where they cannot succeed. To me this suggests that as long as our advocacy for inclusion begins and ends as a “special education reform,” it literally will not make sense to many parents. We might as well be reciting Jabberwocky to these parents for all the sense we make. To talk about “inclusive special education” is like describing those who “gyre and gimble in the wabe.” It sounds as though it should make sense, but it doesn’t fit the definitions that parents have learned to use about what it means to “be in” special education. One can “be in” special education or one can be included with some “extra help.” But for many parents, you cannot be both and that seems to be what we are asking.

The policy/parent gap has not exactly gone unnoticed. The rhetoric of family involvement and community linkages with schools is something we all hear (and use). However, the focus groups have shown me how deep the chasm is between how we have promoted inclusion and what parents understood us to be saying. As long as this gap remains both wide and deep, then we will never successfully bridge that other gap between policy and practice in our schools. Where’s Moses when you need him to get you to the Promised Land?

For more information about the National Institute for Urban School Improvement, visit their Web site at: http://www.edc.org/urban.
NAESP Publishes IDEA Guide for Principals

in previously NAESP-developed general standards for quality elementary and middle schools, and thus, should be considered as an extension to them. They are:

- **School organization**
  The organization of a quality elementary or middle school arises from the school’s educational philosophy and is designed to meet the specific needs of its children. The organization of a school will impact the ease with which principals implement legal requirements and sound practices related to educating children with disabilities.

- **Leadership**
  The principal is involved in every aspect of the school’s operation and is, therefore, the primary figure in determining the school’s quality and character. Principals in quality elementary and middle schools exhibit strong leadership capabilities. Because the principal’s own vision contributes to the overall vision of the school community, he or she is key to ensuring that children with disabilities learn and succeed.

- **Curriculum and instruction**
  The principal guides the instructional program toward the achievement of clearly defined curricular goals and objectives. The curriculum—developed by the staff with the active involvement of parents and community members—reflects the specific needs and values of the community, draws on research about how children with disabilities learn, and integrates the standards of professional subject area associations and core content as may be established by the state.

- **Staff development**
  Staff development is the key to effective teaching and improved child performance. Quality staff development is a priority for all instructional staff who have an impact on child learning—including regular education teachers, paraprofessionals, special educators, and related service providers. The principal ensures that everyone—including instructional staff, related service providers, paraprofessionals, support and clerical staff, and volunteers—is prepared to assist children with disabilities in achieving high standards.

- **School climate**
  School climate may be defined as the qualities of a school that affect the attitudes, behavior, and achievement of the individuals involved in its operation—children, staff, parents, and members of the community. In quality schools, staff members and children care for, respect, and trust one another.

- **Assessment**
  A principal continually assesses school programs, child achievement, and staff performance. Assessment is an ongoing process for determining whether goals are being achieved and expectations met. The principal promotes effective, realistic assessment procedures that ensure valid and appropriate information about children with disabilities and their programs/services.

Principals who have been embracing an increasingly diverse population of children with disabilities for some time know that they play a central role in helping to guarantee that the changes in IDEA ’97 will produce improved results for children with disabilities. To this end, the NAESP Standards of Excellence and accompanying guidelines help to ensure that all children with disabilities learn, and that principals have the supports they need to implement IDEA.

### Implementing IDEA: A Guide for Principals

For each topic, information related to IDEA is presented. An appendix contains a checklist that principals may use to assess themselves on the NAESP-developed standards and guidelines. This guide has been reviewed by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for consistency with the IDEA. Collaborative members and associates will receive multiple copies of the guide for distribution.

The guide is available online at [http://www.ideapactices.org/principalsguide.htm](http://www.ideapactices.org/principalsguide.htm). Hard copies are available from the Council for Exceptional Children by calling: (888) 232-7733 (toll free) or (866) 915-5000 (TTY toll free).

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**Principals need an understanding of the law. They also need to know how IDEA impacts the entire school. My knowledge of special education has enabled me to hold high expectations of students, as well as of their teachers. My knowledge also has aided me in working with parents and in seeking resources in the community.**

June Monterio, Principal, Annandale, VA
Rethinking Learning Disabilities

the environment operate in a reciprocal fashion and that excluding needy children from the specialized services they need is wrong.

The LD definition issues have been with us since the early years of IDEA and the U.S. Department of Education is currently studying this issue. The shortcomings of the current eligibility definition are clear to most educators and advocates. However, crafting an alternative system is fraught with difficulty and a significant risk of unintended consequences. Advocates fear that changes may result in students with LD being denied services, while educators fear inappropriate burgeoning referrals.

No one piece can cover every aspect of a problem. One area that is very relevant to reading proficiency, early language development, is not covered extensively in this chapter. The National Research Council compiled an excellent research synthesis, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, edited by Catherine Snow, et al., that addresses this issue well. This too is a must read. This work identifies the need for language rich preschool programs for students at-risk of reading failure (students from low income families, students with disabilities, and students whose home language is not English). Many of these students who may not experience difficulty in the primary grades may ultimately experience comprehension difficulties in later grades due to lack of language proficiency. The needs of these kids must also be addressed.

Though I believe that Dr. Lyon and his colleague’s chapter is an excellent and important contribution to the field, I have several concerns with how some may use this work. First, special education costs are a major concern to both school districts and members of Congress as they seek to expand the federal commitment to special education. Though many believe that there are too many children served under IDEA, the changes advocated in “Rethinking Learning Disabilities” will take years to implement and will, indeed, be costly. The question of whether the changes advocated in this chapter will ultimately save school districts money is missing the point. The overriding message of this chapter is that we need to fundamentally rethink how we approach early reading instruction and the ways in which we conceptualize learning disabilities. We should be providing students with appropriate early reading interventions because it is the right thing to do. As so many in the field of special education know, when we design our schools to be universally accessible for students with disabilities we design schools that are better for all.

Continued from page 3

Project LASER Update

Component of the project. LASER’s goal is to develop future researchers and scholars to carry the torch of improving schooling for urban children and youth with or suspected of having disabilities.

Mark your calendars for December 5-7, 2001! The perfect place to be this winter is Tampa, Florida for LASER’s first annual research conference. The conference will highlight the research of LASER’s faculty, graduate students, and mentors. As part of the conference, a working session will involve the National Advisory Council and other stakeholders who are identifying areas for a national agenda.

LASER is actively recruiting faculty and graduate students in minority institutions to take advantage of our following services:

- Research grant writing
- Mentorship and professional development
- Urban special education doctoral program
- Computer and distance learning technology
- Action research and practice in urban schools
- Annual urban education research conference
- Faculty research assignments
- Urban school research dissemination

We invite you to contribute to the dynamic scope of the LASER project and join our efforts to impact the plight of urban special education as we narrow the gap between research and practice.

For more information, please contact Project LASER at (813) 974-3195 or carouselcenter@tempest.coedu.usf.edu.
**Endnotes:**

**December 3 - 7, 2001 is National Inclusive Schools Week**

Collaborative member districts are encouraged to participate in the National Institute for Urban School Improvement’s *National Inclusive Schools Week*. Scheduled for the first week in December, the purpose of this event is to celebrate and promote inclusive educational practices within the five districts of the National Institute (Boston, Chicago, Denver, El Paso/Socorro, and Washington, DC) and nationally. The National Institute’s goal is to create an ongoing national dialogue on inclusive schools, which shows how they are, as its slogan states, “Good for kids, families, and communities.” Participating districts will receive a whole host of resources on inclusive schools and inclusive practices and a number of ideas and suggestions that will help them plan for their celebration of *National Inclusive Schools Week*. The Collaborative will share details about this event as they become available.

**Welcome New Member Districts**

The Collaborative currently links 78 school districts from 23 U.S. states plus the District of Columbia. Four new member districts joined the Collaborative since March 2001. Please join us in welcoming:

- Villa Park School District 45, Villa Park, IL
- Hillsborough County School District, Tampa, FL
- Dallas Independent School District, Dallas, TX
- Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, VA

For contact information pertaining to each member district, please visit our Web site at http://www.urbancollaborative.org/members/dist.html

**Collaborative Staff Changes**

Jennifer Quinlan joins the Collaborative as its Research Associate. In addition to editing this newsletter, Jennifer will be responsible for the Collaborative’s other print and online communications, including those of our partner projects.

**Fall 2001 Meeting**

*Topic: Effective Strategies for Teaching Reading to Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools*

*November 8 - 10, 2001 in Orlando, Florida*