

Urban Perspectives

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**SAVE THE DATE:
OCTOBER 21-23, 2004!**

Aligning Assessments, IEPs, Instruction, and Progress Monitoring

**Fall 2004 Meeting
Cambridge Marriott
Boston, MA**



Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies for Students with and without Disabilities in Urban Schools



**Jay Smink,
Executive Director,
National Dropout
Prevention Center**

When we analyze the demographics of our urban schools it is very easy to see why urban leaders are beginning to study the issue more seriously than ever before. The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it is to present a general argument illustrating that school and community leaders need to study this issue because

School Dropout Issue is Critical in Urban Environments

Many different local, state, and national reports reflect the seriousness of the school dropout issue in the United States. The recent report by Greene

and Forster (2003) illustrates the significance of the dropout issue specifically in urban settings. Their study found the 2001 overall high school completion rate in the U.S. to be at 70 percent. A look at the race/ethnicity breakdown shows these graduation rates to be: 72 percent of white students graduated high school, 52 percent of Latino students, and 51 percent of African American students.

Economic Development is Related to the School Dropout Issue

There are at least three reasons why school, community, and business leaders should be highly concerned that our nation's dropout rate is so high and why they must address the issue. First, dropping out has a definite effect on an individual's future economic status. Students who stay in school and earn a high school diploma will secure a better job, have greater opportunities for job advancement, and provide a better quality of life for themselves and their families (Boesel & Fredland, 1999). Second, the dropout rate has a definite impact on the economic status of a community. The reputation and condition of local schools, along with the graduation rate, are major indicators used by corporate leaders when considering business expansion in new states and specific communities. Third, society as a whole is affected because dropouts are more

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Urban Special Education Funding and Class Action Litigation



Thomas Hehir

Thomas Hehir, Senior Policy Advisor

I was asked last year to serve as an expert witness in a school funding case in Massachusetts, *Hancock v. Driscoll*. The case involved student plaintiffs from 19 low-resource school districts (mostly urban) who claimed they were not receiving the standard of education required by the state's constitution.

This case built on an earlier case, *McDuffy v. Secretary of Executive Office of Education*, in which the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court found the state in violation of its constitution (615 N.E.2d 516, 552 [Mass. 1993]). (Similar cases have been brought in other states. Last year in New York, plaintiffs prevailed in court in their efforts to secure more funding for low-resource districts.) The Massachusetts court concluded that the state had an obligation to educate all its children and held that children in less affluent communities "are not receiving their constitutional entitlement of education as intended by the framers of the Constitution" (*Id.*). The court further required the state to define the standard of education that it must provide (*Id.* at 555). In response to the *McDuffy* decision, the state legislature passed and the governor signed the Education Reform Act of 1993 that established a "foundation budget" for each school district to be phased in over seven years (Massachusetts General Laws, chapter 69). This act also included extra resources for students deemed "at risk."

The plaintiffs in the *Hancock* case asserted that, despite the provisions of the Education Reform Act of 1993, students continued to be denied their state constitutional rights due to lack of appropriate facilities, unqualified teaching staff, inordinately large class sizes, and limited access to technology. According to the plaintiffs, the root of these problems was a lack of adequate resources within these districts.

I was asked to determine if students with disabilities were given access to appropriate educational options and, if not, if financial resources were partly responsible for the breakdown. This question led to an evaluation design that provided interesting findings concerning the disparities in educational opportunities available to students with disabilities in low-income districts. Last month the court ruled in favor of the school districts. This decision will require the state to significantly increase resources to these low-income districts. Among other things, the judge specifically cited the need for more special education funding.

The Framework: Four Standards of Effective Practice

In order to determine if education funding was adequate for these districts, I enlisted three of my advanced doctoral students, Lauren Katzman (Ed.D.), Alison Gruner, and Joanne Karger, to assist me in designing and implementing a study. We approached the task of determining whether students were receiving access to the curriculum standards and making sufficient progress toward the attainment of such standards by asking this question: What would you expect to see happening within these schools if children with disabilities were receiving effective education based on the best available research? We developed a framework that included four standards of practice upon which we could evaluate the implementation of special education. The standards and an abbreviated explanation of each follow. Keep in mind that the four standards parallel the three stages of the special education process—pre-referral, referral, and the provision of services—and a consequence of these three stages—student outcomes. These standards are intimately linked. An effective framework for evaluation should not only look at evidence of effectiveness within each standard, but also how each standard connects with and builds upon the others.

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Celebrate *National Inclusive Schools Week!*



The 4th Annual *National Inclusive Schools Week* will be celebrated December 6-10, 2004 in classrooms, schools, and communities

throughout the country to highlight the nation's progress in providing a quality education to an increasingly diverse student population, particularly to those who have disabilities. The *Week* is sponsored by the National Institute for Urban School Improvement, a federally-funded partner project of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

The *Week* emphasizes the message, "Inclusive Schools: Good for Kids, Families, & Communities," which

highlights the benefits of inclusive education for all children. This year, the *Week* will focus on the value of "working together" and emphasizes the importance of collaboration among families, school personnel, and community leaders to create of inclusive communities.

An updated Celebration Kit which contains publications that outline the benefits of inclusive schools, suggested readings for children and adults, celebration ideas and lesson plans, and materials to use in promoting the *Week* will be available in early fall.

To learn more about the *Week*, visit www.inclusiveschools.org or contact niusi@edc.org.



Essentials Teachers Need to Support Students



A new Issue Brief, available in late summer, examines the knowledge and skills teachers need in order to teach in an environment of accountability and standards-based reform. The brief, entitled "Essential Knowledge and Skills Needed by Teachers to Support the Achievement of Students with Disabilities," is a result of a national symposium conducted by the Education Policy Reform Research Institute (EPRRI) to identify and validate essential knowledge and key skills that all educators need to increase the participation and performance of students with disabilities in standards-based environments.

Model standards for teacher preparation are available and many states have used them to make changes in their standards for licensing both general and special education teachers. These standards, however, may not ensure that teachers understand the elements of standards-

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4th Annual LASER Urban Education Research Conference
Reconstructing Urban Education: "With All Deliberate Speed"
September 23-25, 2004
 (Pre-conference: September 22)
Wyndham Emerald Plaza Hotel
San Diego, California

Conference highlights:
 • Dynamic presenters
 • Youth cultural night
 • Community town hall meeting
 ...and much more

Invited Keynote Speakers:
 Dr. Na'im Akbar
 Florida State University
 Ms. Nancy Todd Noches
 Brown v. Board of Education

Invited Presenters:
 • Dr. Lisa Delpit
 Florida International University
 • Dr. Sharon Ibbil-Jordan
 Creighton University
 • Mr. Greg Michie
 University of Chicago, Illinois
 • Dr. Valerie Pang
 San Diego State University

For more information, please visit <http://www.coedu.usf.edu/LASER> or contact LASER Assistant Director Dr. Monika Shealey (Shealey@tempest.coedu.usf.edu or 813-974-9560), or LASER Project Coordinator Ms. Ann-Kay Pizano (apizano@tempest.coedu.usf.edu or 813-974-9890).

Upcoming
Activities

16th Annual
National Dropout
Prevention
Conference

October 30 -
November 4, 2004

The 16th Annual National Dropout Prevention Conference and the First Annual Special Education Forum will be held at the Rosen Plaza Hotel, Orlando, Florida. Attend and experience over 150 presentations designed to increase knowledge and enhance skills in effective dropout prevention programs for all students.

For more information, visit www.dropoutprevention.org.

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Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention



likely to be homeless, single parents, jobless, underemployed, part of the welfare system, or incarcerated, and

less likely to volunteer in community activities. The result of all these factors is higher societal costs and fewer benefits to society from students who drop out of school.

Reasons Students Leave School Before Graduating

Many researchers have thoroughly studied the variety of reasons students leave school before graduation. Wells' (1990) model is one of the easiest to understand and is widely used by other researchers as they make their own modifications.

Four categories appear to capture all the reasons reported by students for leaving school before graduation. This article cannot list all of the symptoms related to each of the categories but a few samples of the more common indicators are identified below.

Category 1: Student-based

- Lack of motivation
- Poor attendance patterns
- Low academic achievement
- Nonparticipation in school activities

Category 2: Family-based

- Low socioeconomic status
- No parental support
- High family mobility
- Non-English speaking family

Category 3: School-based

- Lack of adequate counseling
- Lack of varied instructional methods
- Failure to understand different cultures
- Misused suspension and retention policies

Category 4: Community-based

- Low community value on education
- Lack of social services and community support
- Lack of school-business partnerships
- Lack of coordination with community-based organizations

Understanding the reasons why students leave school early can help school and community planners jointly develop intervention programs for implementation in the school environment and within the community.

The Most Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) has been studying the issue of school dropouts since 1986. It has focused on identifying model dropout prevention programs and successful practices in representative schools at all levels and in different size communities across the nation. In January 2004, NDPC/N expanded its services with the establishment of the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD). NDPC-SD is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and is a new addition to OSEP's Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network.

The new Center supports state and local education agencies in designing, implementing, and evaluating effective strategies and comprehensive dropout prevention programs for students with disabilities. NDPC-SD will utilize professional publications, conferences, forums, institutes, and Web-based activities to disseminate research-validated practices and resources about dropout prevention strategies for students with disabilities to state education agencies, policymakers, administrators, researchers, parents, teachers, and other practitioners. This Center is partnering with Education Development Center, Inc. of Newton, Massachusetts and the Intercultural Development Research Association of San Antonio, Texas to carry out these activities.

The NDPC/N has observed a close relationship between model programs, outstanding schools, administrative leadership, excellent teaching practices, and effective strategies for dropout prevention

programs. They add up to higher student achievement levels and increased high school graduation rates. Early work in synthesizing research and state practices in dropout prevention programs for students with disabilities has revealed that associated variables for students with disabilities are many of the same variables identified for students without disabilities. Hence, effective strategies for dropout prevention programs become basic components of a comprehensive school improvement program for all students.

The NDPC/N has identified 15 strategies that have the most positive impact on the dropout rate. These strategies, although appearing to be independent, actually work well together and frequently overlap. They can be implemented as stand-alone programs (e.g., mentoring or family involvement projects). However, when school districts develop a program improvement plan that encompasses most or all of these strategies, positive outcomes are more likely to result. Implementing more strategies in a comprehensive school improvement plan tends to increase the graduation rate. These strategies have been successful in all school levels from K-12 and in rural, suburban, and urban areas.

The 15 strategies are identified below with brief explanations. They are described in greater detail in the book, *Helping Students Graduate*, by Smink and Schargel (2004). The strategies are clustered into four groups.

A School and Community Perspective

Students who come to school reflect the wider community. When students leave school, either before or after graduation, they return to that community. It is impossible to isolate “school” within the walls of the school building. Effective efforts to keep students in school take advantage of these links with the wider community.

1) Systemic Renewal: Systemic renewal calls for a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners.

2) School-Community Collaboration: When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring environment where youth can thrive and achieve.

3) Safe Learning Environments: A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students at all grade levels.

Early Interventions

Early identification of children at risk and effective interventions are vital components of a successful school experience. Attitudes and behaviors can often be changed before they are deeply entrenched. These three strategies begin at birth but continue throughout a child’s school years.

4) Family Engagement: Family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children’s achievement and is one of the most accurate predictors of a student’s success in school.

5) Early Childhood Education: Birth-to-three interventions demonstrate that providing a child with additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction in the primary grades, beginning with pre-kindergarten.

6) Early Literacy Development: Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all subjects.

Basic Core Strategies

These four student-centered strategies engage students in dynamic and meaningful learning opportunities in alternative, traditional, and community settings, and can make a significant impact on the school dropout problem.

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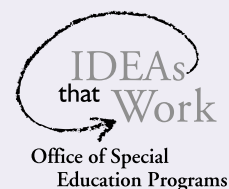
Upcoming Activities

Teleconference Series Kickoff

**September 30, 2004
1:00 p.m. (EST)**

Dr. Brian Cobb from the What Works Synthesis Center at Colorado State University will share findings from a critical review of the research on dropout prevention programs including strategies for students with disabilities.

*For more information, visit
www.dropoutprevention.org.*



Good High Schools: Describing and Validating Results for Students with Disabilities



Cynthia Mata Aguilar, Education Development Center, Inc.



Susan Erber, NYC Community School District 75



Alice Farling, Fairfax County Public Schools

Cynthia Mata Aguilar, Susan Erber, and Alice Farling

High school is the last and best opportunity for adolescents with disabilities to develop skills for transitioning to post-secondary employment and education. Becky, a junior at Centreville High School, and Racheed, a sophomore at Edward R. Murrow High School, share dreams of graduating high school and going to technical school or college. Both recently passed state assessments, Becky, the Virginia Standard of Learning (SOL) in Algebra I, and Racheed, the New York Regents in science. Yet for many students who have disabilities the results are disappointing. Research shows that compared to general education students they are at the greatest risk of dropping out, and only 57 percent graduate with regular diplomas (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In the tenth grade, the achievement scores of most students with disabilities level off at the fifth-grade level (Rivera, 1997). In response, many high schools are adopting school-wide approaches and supports that enable students with disabilities to succeed in the general education curriculum. These schools provide powerful examples of what is possible for these students.

Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) is currently studying several of these high schools as part of the Good High Schools Project. In 2002, EDC was awarded a three-year research grant by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs to identify three high schools that are truly high performing for all students. The research team began with a national search for urban high schools that serve an economically and culturally diverse population of more than 700 students and achieve high scores on statewide tests for all students, including students with disabilities. From over 40 applicants representing 17 states, EDC chose eight semi-finalists.

The team finally selected Centreville High School in Fairfax County, Virginia; Choctawhatchee High School in Ft. Walton

Beach, Florida; and Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn, New York. The team "mapped backwards" from the schools' high scores to unearth what makes the schools work well for diverse groups of learners. EDC hopes to learn what supports students with disabilities are receiving in order to feel welcome and succeed academically. The team surveyed all faculty and sophomore-level students in each school; shadowed selected students, like Becky and Racheed; interviewed students, faculty, and student leaders; and observed classes in every subject area.

Centreville and Murrow have both been designated Schools of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education and recognized by Newsweek Magazine for their academic excellence. In addition they are in member districts of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

Centreville High School, Clifton, VA

Centreville High School is a comprehensive high school with 1,970 students in grades 9-12. On two separate occasions it has received The Arc award which recognizes individuals and/or teams that have made significant advancements in the education of children with disabilities. Forty-three percent of the student population is culturally and linguistically diverse, including a large population of Asian students from Korea, China, and Pakistan. The African American population is approximately 8 percent, and there is a growing Latino population. Although only 13 percent of students apply and qualify for free and/or reduced lunch, Pam Latt, the principal, believes that, based on statistics from the feeder middle schools, the accurate free and reduced rate count may be double that number.

State assessments: Centreville's general education students perform well on Virginia state assessments (SOL), which are course-specific. In 2001-02, 87 percent passed the English and 80 percent passed the math exam. At Centreville no students with

disabilities took an alternative test. Approximately 50 percent of the students with disabilities passed the eleventh grade English test and, in 2002, 67 percent passed the mathematics test.

Support for students with disabilities:

Centreville has 26 special education teachers (of the 162 teachers in the school) and 11 instructional aides serving 272 students with disabilities, 75 percent of whom are classified as learning disabled.

A key support is inclusion in co-taught classes that span grade levels and content areas. Forty-four percent of special education students participate in these classes with no additional support; while 23 percent attend additional basic skills classes to support their learning in the regular classroom. Dr. Alice Farling, the district's assistant superintendent and Collaborative member, says, "Creating inclusive school environments that enable students with disabilities to achieve alongside their non-disabled peers at their neighborhood schools is a priority for Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). For that vision to become a reality, the district established a school board target designed to ensure inclusive environments for students with disabilities in all Fairfax County schools. It provides a clear message to schools, parents, and the community that FCPS values inclusive settings." A second support is flexible hand-scheduling by the special education director and assistant principal who match students' needs with specific courses, teacher strengths, and outside job opportunities.

With the support of sign language interpreters, Becky, a deaf student in the special education program at Centreville High, begins her day with basic skills where she receives one-on-one support, followed by American Sign Language (a foreign language elective for all students), a self-contained history class, and a learning seminar where students learn study skills, do homework, take tests, go to the library, and discuss important issues. Her last class is a co-taught geosystems class. Becky wants to go to college, but first, she must pass the English SOL, a requirement for graduation.

To encourage continuity, the thirty-five percent of special education students who are classified as severely disabled and are in self-contained classes follow the same curriculum as the general education classes. There are also 11 students in a Functional Life Experience class pursuing work-study and life skills, such as writing resumes and keeping accounts for businesses.

**Edward R. Murrow High School
Brooklyn, NY**

Edward R. Murrow High School is a New York City "educational option" school that specializes in Communication Arts, including curriculum offerings in writing, literature studies, theater, television, and dramatic productions. It also offers an extensive curriculum beyond the arts, including global studies, criminal justice, social history, and science. The school has 4,000 students in grades 9-12. Murrow has a diverse student population: 25 percent African American, 19 percent Asian, and 13 percent Latino. In 2001, 40 percent of the students were immigrants, and more than half spoke English as a second language. Almost 19 percent of its students qualify for free and/or reduced lunch.

Students with disabilities make up 10 percent of the student population. A high proportion of those students have "low incidence" disabilities, including 92 students with low mobility, 40 who are visually limited, and 44 who are deaf or hard of hearing. Susan Erber, the District 75 special education superintendent and a long-term member of the Collaborative, says, "The presence of students with special needs affords the school community of Murrow High School a unique opportunity to learn from and develop sensitivity toward learners with hearing and visual impairments, autism, cognitive disabilities, and multiple disabilities. The dynamic leadership of Principal Bruckner sets the tone for the school, expecting high outcomes of all students and full partnerships within the school community. We have been made most welcome at this school, with equal access and equal opportunities affording students with significant disabilities 'full membership' at Edward R. Murrow High School."

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**Good High
Schools Project**



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Good High Schools

State assessments: Murrow’s general education students have excelled on New York state assessments (Regents) since the school’s founding. In 2002–03, 86 percent passed the English and 77 percent passed the math assessment. In 2000–01, 42 percent of the students with disabilities taking the English test passed and 66 percent passed the math test. Each of the 109 ninth-graders with disabilities who enrolled in 1997–98 ultimately graduated. Forty-two students graduated with their class; 18 with a regular diploma and 24 with an alternate diploma. The other 67 students graduated after 2001.

Support for students with disabilities: The special education departments at Murrow includes 215 professional staff; however staff members also teach in other departments because of the recent practice of hiring teachers with certification in both a content area and special education. The school provides wide access to its curriculum by offering courses in a variety of forms with

varying levels of academic support. A course on the Civil War might, for example, take the form of an honors course (open to any student), a mainstream class with resource room support, or an “inclusion” class which balances students with disabilities and typically achieving students and is co-taught by a general and special education teacher.

A student at Murrow with cognitive delays, Racheed’s day consists of self-contained classes in English, American History, and Computer Science, as well as a co-taught class in Living Environments. On our second visit, he proudly shared that he had passed his Regents exam with flying colors. His eyes brighten when he talks about his hobby—auto detailing. His dream is to attend technical school to learn the skills needed to run his own business.

Murrow offers several other forms of support. The “SAGA” program was designed to build essential skills for less advanced students in self-contained classes. It combines literacy skills with learning history content. Individual paraprofessionals work with the substantial number of Murrow students who have mobility, visual, auditory, and other severe disabilities. “Ramp-up” classes are double-period classes designed for ninth- and tenth-grade students with weak mathematics and/or literacy skills. In addition, student and adult tutors are available for all students. ■

For more information about the Good High Schools Project, visit www2.edc.org/goodhighschools/.

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The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems presents a...

National Research Conference

English Language Learners Struggling to Learn: Emergent Research on Linguistic Differences and Learning Disabilities

**Scottsdale, Arizona
November 18-19, 2004**

Co-sponsored by Arizona State University, Council for Exceptional Children, and the National Association for Bilingual Education, the conference will present original, emergent scholarship on the differences between second language acquisition and learning disabilities.



For more information or to register, visit NCCREST's Web site: www.nccrest.org.

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Funding and Class Action Litigation

Standard 1: Pre-referral

Children who demonstrate potential problems with reading and/or behavior are identified and supported at an early age, prior to referral for special education services. Pre-referral, the first stage of the special education process, has generally been viewed as a method of helping to prevent the misidentification of students with disabilities and reduce the number of inappropriate referrals (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Graden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985). In contrast, we formulated the above standard of best practice embodying a functional definition of pre-referral that focuses specifically on reading and behavior, two areas identified in the literature as important for helping all children to succeed in school.

Standard 2: Referral

The process for special education referral is appropriate, culturally sensitive, timely, and efficient. The effectiveness of a school district's referral process is intimately connected to the pre-referral process. If pre-referral is successful, then most students with disabilities will be identified by the third or fourth grade and will be referred to special education. Inadequate pre-referral processes can result in the subsequent referral of students who do not have disabilities for special education services, while inadequate referral processes can result in the failure to refer students who do need special education services. High numbers of referrals in later grades, especially for disabilities that affect children's ability to read, indicate that the district is not conducting referrals in a timely and appropriate manner.

Standard 3: The Provision of Services

Students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment and have access to the general curriculum. The third standard follows directly from the referral process. While current federal and state evaluations of compliance with IDEA examine a variety of areas pertaining to services for students with disabilities, our standard of best

practice focuses on two specific aspects of service provision that have been identified in the literature as important for ensuring that students with disabilities achieve high outcomes: (1) education in the least restrictive environment and (2) access to the general education curriculum.

Standard 4: Outcomes

Educational outcomes of students with disabilities, with the exception of those with cognitive disabilities, should be comparable to those of their non-disabled peers (That is students should be able to pass the state's competency exam, MCAS.) Once a district meets the first three standards for best practice, it should be able to meet the fourth standard as a natural consequence of the previous three. Research on the ability of students with disabilities to achieve to high standards is promising, albeit limited. The limitation is due in part to the fact that not until the 1997 amendments to IDEA was there a requirement that students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments, or that they have access to the general education curriculum.

Methodology

Our evaluation design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative sources of data included: performance of students with disabilities on the statewide test (MCAS), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) placement data, timeline compliance for IEP development, and the number of qualified providers serving students with disabilities in the district. Qualitative data were derived from interviews with leadership personnel. Mostly principals and special education directors addressed issues such as the staff development activities provided to teachers, response of the schools to students experiencing early reading and behavior problems, and basis for decisions concerning LRE. We also probed about the degree to which implementation problems were associated with resources. We further evaluated three high-resource districts

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The ramifications of the Hancock decision are quite significant for many communities in Massachusetts and may pave the way for the inclusion of special education in other funding suits throughout the country.

Funding and Class Action Litigation

according to a select set of these standards. These data offered a comparison to data from the low-income districts.

Findings

In our evaluation for *Hancock v. Driscoll*, we generally found that in the four low-resource districts, practices were not consistent with the standards upon which this evaluation was based and there was a connection between the lack of available resources and implementation of the standards. Conversely, we found rather high implementation of these standards in the high-resource districts. In high-income communities students are largely benefiting from research-based, state-of-the-art practices with the vast majority passing a rather difficult state exit exam. On the other hand, students with disabilities in low-income districts experience late interventions, poor access to the general curriculum, and significantly higher levels of segregation. The great majority fail to pass exit exams, thus risking a life without the benefits of a high school diploma.

By engaging in a rigorous, in-depth examination of how and why these standards were not being met, we were able to reveal complexities that were quite informative, not only for the lawsuit but also for the districts themselves. In fact, one of the districts decided to use our findings as part of a larger self-improvement effort within the district. Below is one example of our findings that demonstrates the utility of our evaluation framework.

Pre-referral

Traditional evaluations typically do not address pre-referral because it is not a special education function. However, our framework acknowledges the strong connections

between pre-referral, as defined by a district's ability to address the needs of students who experience problems with reading or behavior, and special education classifications.

In general, we found that the low-income districts were not providing adequate support for children who demonstrated problems with reading or behavior in the early grades. Our interviews revealed that, although leadership personnel knew they should be intervening with children who demonstrated problems with reading or behavior, they reported that they did not have sufficient resources to do so. For example, the special education director in one district explained that the district did not provide robust literacy instruction in general education; rather, special education provided most of the literacy remediation. She hypothesized that more students were referred for special education services than would have been if the district provided these services.

At the same time, we found variability in pre-referral practices among the low-income districts, indicating that lack of resources alone was not the only factor involved. One of the low-income districts had fewer students classified as SED (7 percent) than the national average (8.2 percent). We found that the district had a solid program of behavioral interventions in general education used prior to a special education referral. Before a student was referred for special education services for behavior, the district employed a "three-level triage" which helped them identify those students with a "conduct disorder" and those with an emotional disability.

Implications

This case has far-reaching implications for urban special education. The

ramifications of the *Hancock* decision are quite significant for many communities in Massachusetts and may pave the way for the inclusion of special education in other funding suits throughout the country. Low-resource communities in Massachusetts, and possibly elsewhere, should ultimately be receiving significant increases in special education funding. However, money alone will not improve educational results for students with disabilities. District leadership, both general and special education, must use this money to change service delivery and incorporate research-based practices. Another piece of good news shown by this study is that special education leaders, and often general education leaders, do know what they should be doing but have been prohibited from implementing those things due to lack of resources. Here's hoping that Massachusetts' urban educators will lead the way in providing true educational equity for urban students with disabilities. ■

A complete copy of the report submitted to the court is available to Collaborative members at www.urbancollaborative.org.

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Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

7) *Mentoring/Tutoring*: Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

8) *Service-Learning*: Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility, and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

9) *Alternative Schooling*: Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts with a variety of options that can lead to graduation, and programs that pay special attention to the student's individual social needs, as well as academic requirements for a high school diploma.

10) *After-School Opportunities*: Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because they fill "gap times" with constructive and engaging activities.

Making the Most of Instruction

No sustained and comprehensive effort to keep students in school can afford to ignore what happens in the classroom. Strategies that produce better teachers, expand teaching methods to accommodate a range of learning styles, take advantage of today's cornucopia of technological resources, and meet the individual needs of each student can yield substantial benefits.

11) *Professional Development*: Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can

continue to develop skills and techniques and learn about innovative strategies.

12) *Active Learning*: Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn.

13) *Educational Technology*: Technology offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students' learning styles.

14) *Individualized Instruction*: Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies that consider these individual differences.

15) *Career and Technical Education (CTE)*: A quality CTE program and related guidance program are essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific skills to prepare them for the increased demands of today's workplace.

Conclusion

These research-based dropout prevention strategies are not new to urban school districts or special education leaders. The 15 strategies are found in most schools and are appropriate for all students. The value of an individualized instruction plan for each student has been understood by the special education community for a long time. Fortunately, it is now being recognized by regular educators as a strategy to increase academic achievement and eventually the graduation rate. We all can learn from each of these strategies.

In summary, there is no single silver bullet to reduce the dropout rate. A continual effort to pursue all of these proven strategies and approaches over the long term is necessary for all school and community leaders. School leaders that implement an excellent school improvement plan will also have an excellent dropout prevention plan and vice versa. ■

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EPRRI Update

based reform and how to appropriately include all students in state and district assessments.

EPRRI's new publication asserts the need for all teachers to become knowledgeable about standards, assessments, and the accountability system in their respective states. In addition, it places an increasingly important responsibility on institutions of higher education and state departments of education to determine how best to ensure that all educators have the knowledge and skills needed to increase the participation and performance of students with disabilities in standards-based environments. ■

For more information or to download the publication, visit EPRRI's Web site: www.eprri.org.



Urban Perspectives is a publication of the *Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative*. The Collaborative is a leadership development and networking organization for urban special education leaders.

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Collaborative Online Happenings



Collaborative Redesigns Web site

The Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative is pleased to announce the launch of its new Web site. The goals of this newly redesigned site are to better provide Collaborative members an additional resource and vehicle to network and share; promote Collaborative events, publications, and online professional development; and recruit new districts and urban school administrators who will benefit from the Collaborative's services.

Collaborative Professional Development Goes Online

The Collaborative is proud to announce an online professional development opportunity. "School-wide Behavior Support Systems: Design and Implementation" will be offered in the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005. The Collaborative's Senior Program Advisor, Robert March, Ph.D., will serve as lead faculty sharing his expertise in establishing school-wide behavior support systems in urban schools. The 13-week course will

introduce school teams and individual participants to the foundations of school-wide behavior supports while guiding them through the steps of designing a plan to implement in their own school. Three graduate credits are available for participants. Teams from a district or school are encouraged to take the course together. ■

For more information, visit www.urbancollaborative.org.

Welcome New Member Districts

The Collaborative currently links 87 school districts from 27 states plus the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Five new member districts have joined the Collaborative since April 2004. Please join us in welcoming:

- Gwinnett County Public Schools, Lawrenceville, GA
- Sun Prairie Area Public Schools, Sun Prairie, WI
- Evanston Skokie District 65, Evanston, IL
- Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, City of Industry, CA
- Denver Public Schools Northeast Quadrant, Denver, CO

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

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