As the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) are being implemented across the U.S., the performance and progress of the subgroup of students with disabilities appears to be one of the most problematic. States have reported varying levels of proficiency on reading and math assessments for students with disabilities in the various grade levels. Despite progress, many of these students are well below the initial performance targets that have been set for them.

The Study
In an effort to better understand the issue of academic performance among students with disabilities, we conducted a study in two school districts in which we examined the effect of various school-level factors on the achievement of this group of students on statewide assessments. These data were collected for two school districts in each of four states through the Education Policy Research Reform Institute (EPRRI) as part of a larger study examining the effects of education policy reform on students with disabilities. We used data from the districts for school years 1999-2000 through 2001-2002.

Three types of school-level variables were examined: demographic, school, and special education characteristics. School-level demographic characteristics (e.g., overall socioeconomic status of the school population, percent of students who qualify as English Language Learners) were included because they have been shown to influence student achievement. An additional school characteristic was school size, which also has been shown to affect student achievement at the building level. These relationships have remained largely unexplored for students with disabilities. We also looked at a set of school-level special education variables. We identified school-level variables that we believed might affect the achievement of students receiving special education services.

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Teaching in Urban Schools: Eleven Principles Toward Effective Outcomes

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For most of the past decade, we have been working on various research projects focused on the academic and behavioral success of urban learners, with a particular emphasis on reducing special education and disciplinary referrals for minority (especially African American male) students. With varying degrees of success, our work has led us to the observations articulated in this article. Although not novel and certainly expressed elsewhere in different forms by other authorities (e.g., Association for Effective Schools, 1996), we also decided to publish these principles as applied classroom strategies: Teaching Urban Learners (Cartledge & Lo, 2006). We described 11 elements we found to be true of those schools that are most effective in reducing special education and disciplinary referrals for urban learners.

1) School leaders are educational experts. We obtained the most favorable results in schools where leaders recognized what needed to be done to improve pupil learning and were resourceful in providing the requisite personnel, training, support, and materials. Student academic and social growth were given top priority by these leaders, who were fearless in regard to making changes.

2) The curriculum and instructional program reflect the needs of the targeted population. Some urban schools observe the same failure pattern year after year (e.g., 50-75 percent of students begin kindergarten without the literacy skills needed for reading success), yet the staff persist in teaching in the same way, thereby obtaining the same results (i.e., extensive student failure). A modest change in the kindergarten classroom curriculum, consisting of greater emphasis on phonemic/phonological awareness with corresponding intensive instruction for those at greatest risk, made substantial differences in reading readiness for these learners.

3) Instructional staff are committed and well-prepared. Our experience convinced us that good urban teachers are well-prepared and confident; they maintain a “can do” attitude, they believe in the inherent worth of their students, and they help to develop a school community centered on the students’ needs. Committed teachers not only participate in professional development, they also permit themselves to be closely supervised and “coached” to develop requisite skills. We also found that paraprofessionals could be trained to deliver critical supplementary instruction to children with skill deficits.

4) Prevention is emphasized. Early learning is extremely important, and the failure to intervene at the earliest grades may result in lost opportunities that cannot be recaptured, even with later interventions. Every effort needs to be taken to make sure that kindergarteners and first graders are provided with a rigorous instructional program with the most qualified teachers and staff. Prevention efforts also need to continue through the later grades, making certain that learning and behavior problems do not develop and that disciplinary or special education referrals are minimized. Our preliminary findings support the position that efforts made toward prevention in the early years are most likely to pay off later on.

5) Teaching has a sense of urgency. Urban students who begin school in the deficit position, with limited literacy experiences, are not likely to have the same learning advantages as more privi-
leged learners; hence, the ever widening achievement gap. Time is of the essence for these students. Instruction needs to be intensified at the earliest grades, and this pace needs to be maintained to ensure that students are at or above grade level by the end of each grade. Students must be taught directly, they must be taught immediately, and they must be taught more, not less.

6) Academic interventions are effective and produce high academic engagement. We heartily endorse the importance of well-researched and validated teaching methods that produce high rates of student academic engagement. We emphasized active student response and progress monitoring in our reading and behavior interventions, with resulting improvements in both academic and social behaviors. For reading, we trained school personnel to effectively deliver “secondary interventions” such as phonemic awareness instruction, sight word peer tutoring, and repeated readings to supplement the classroom reading instruction as a means to prevent or minimize reading disabilities.

Built into these strategies were high rates of pupils responding, often using a peer-mediated format, so that students were constantly responding correctly to the material being taught. Pupils performance measures were collected daily or weekly so that student progress was monitored continuously and instructional adjustments made accordingly. Interventions for social behaviors involved teacher training in classroom management, small group social skills training, and the use of functional assessments to implement individualized behavior plans. Similarly, students received ample practice with the targeted skills and close supervision/monitoring of their skill performance.

7) Instructional decisions in urban schools need to evolve from data based on urban students. Good instructional programs for urban learners should be derived from data showing the effectiveness of these practices. Ongoing student performance data should be used to guide instructional decisions. It was not uncommon for us to observe teachers exercising practices that produced little effect on students’ academic and social skills over time. Too often, teachers were willing to reject strategies, even with supporting research data derived from their own students, simply because the strategies did not support their own preconceived notions of classroom teaching. In every case we used progress monitoring, single-subject designs, or group designs to show that students benefited from the interventions. These data also were used to adjust interventions for stronger applications. It is imperative that urban educators learn to recognize, value, and implement evidence-based instructional practices.

8) Expectations are high. This is essential for good teaching and learning within urban schools. If teachers and schools have high academic and behavioral expectations of their students, instructional activities will be programmed accordingly. For example, the teacher who specifies that students in his or her first grade class will read and comprehend at least 60 words per minute by the end of the school year will ensure that the curriculum comprises ample oral reading, fluency, and comprehension activities, in order to reach this goal. To maximize pupil learning outcomes, classroom instruction is driven by the goal (i.e., high expectations) rather than dictated by traditional classroom activities.

9) Behavioral interventions are effective. A pervasive and major concern in urban schools is obtaining orderly, socially appropriate behavior. School personnel need to commit to creating disciplined environments by implementing approaches that teach children how they are to behave and then reward them accordingly. The emphasis is not on control but rather on helping students...
The 6th Annual National Inclusive Schools Week, scheduled for December 4-8, 2006, highlights and celebrates the progress our nation's schools have made in using inclusive practices to ensure a quality education for an increasingly diverse student population, including students with disabilities, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and English language learners. Each year, the Week focuses on a particularly challenging area or aspect of integrating inclusive practices into the school experience. The theme of the 6th annual celebration is Charting an Inclusive Journey through School, Work, and Life: Successful Transition Planning for All Students.

Throughout a student's academic career, he or she will experience many transitions—from elementary to middle school, from middle to high school, and from high school to post-secondary education or work. These changes can be difficult even for students who have the best supports, but for students with disabilities, English language learners, and those with little family and community support, these transitions can make the difference between success and failure. Inclusive schools and communities guide children and youth along a personalized and supportive path, which can ensure smoother transitions and, ultimately, success.

The 2006 National Inclusive Schools Week will highlight resources and literature that educators and families can use to prepare students to manage and embrace change, as well as various tools to teach self-advocacy and self-determination skills that will benefit them throughout their lives. Numerous resources, materials, and products are available on the Web site throughout the year to help schools plan for the Week and spread the message that inclusive practices benefit all students. An updated Celebration Kit, which will include publications that speak to the benefits of inclusive schools, celebration ideas, lesson plans, and other publications, will be released later this year on www.inclusiveschools.org.

“We are excited about this unique opportunity to bring much needed attention around transition planning,” said David Riley, Executive Director of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative, a chief sponsor of the Week. “School professionals across the country are being held accountable for effectively planning student transitions, but are often left without the tools, resources, or professional collaboration to meet these objectives. Families also need these tools and resources.” The Week will actively collect, compile, and develop a pool of resources designed to support educators, students, and parents in planning effective transitions.

With widespread and meaningful participation across the U.S. and in several foreign nations, the 5th Annual National Inclusive Schools Week (December 5-9, 2005) was the most successful yet. The Week was celebrated in thousands of schools in virtually all 50 states. There were 500,000 hits to www.inclusiveschools.org and a record 60,000 Celebration Kits were downloaded. Additionally, 100,000 posters, pencils, and stickers were disseminated, and more than 50 association and corporate partners promoted the Week. The White House recognized the event with a message of support and appreciation to parents and educators, as well as the organizers of this celebration that seeks to develop schools and communities that are welcoming of all children and youth. It is anticipated that the 2006 Week will build upon this momentum and break participation records.

For more information, visit www.inclusiveschools.org.
Visionary Middle Schools: Signature Practices and the Power of Local Invention

Cynthia Mata Aguilar and Nancy Brigham
Education Development Center, Inc.

Visionary Middle Schools: Signature Practices and the Power of Local Invention tells the story of three urban middle schools that created inclusive school environments in which students with disabilities succeed both academically and socially. The book is based on a study conducted by Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) and funded by the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. EDC began the study in 1997 with a project called “Beacons of Excellence” and conducted a nationwide search for urban middle schools that met the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform criteria of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity. Together with the special education and general education organizations, the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative played a critical role in helping to identify schools, and two of the schools selected are located in Collaborative member districts. The three schools are Dolphin Middle School (FL), Da Vinci Middle School (NJ) and Carter-Dean Middle School (MO).*

Since the focus of the study was students with disabilities, the study sought schools with a meaningful proportion of these students. The percentage of students with disabilities within the three Beacon schools ranged from 23 percent at Dolphin to 17.5 percent at Carter. Most students fell within the category of learning disabilities, but two schools included students with more significant disabilities.

*School names are fictional.

How the Study Was Conducted

The research used both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including interviews with students and faculty, focus groups, classroom observations, and a school-wide survey of students and teachers. Two innovative methods—shadowing students throughout the school day and “Kids with Cameras”—helped to enrich the study.

Shadowing consisted of following a student with a disability for an entire day and recording that student’s experiences in every class, including the work assigned, the student’s interactions with his/her teachers, the student’s level of engagement, and the expectations held for that student. Through one-on-one conversations, students shared their feelings about their classes, homework, teachers, school, and friends. Each member of the research team shadowed one or more students in the three schools.

Kids with Cameras is a visual and written record of what students with disabilities find most important in their schools. Given disposable cameras,
The Collaborative’s Spring Meeting, “Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools Through Partnerships,” was held May 10-13, 2006 in Miami, Florida, and attended by nearly 200 general and special education leaders from across the country and Canada. Meeting participants learned about the external organizational relationships Collaborative member districts have forged that have had a positive impact on the academic, social, emotional, vocational, and post-school growth and accomplishments of children and youth with disabilities. These partnerships included teacher training programs, parent advocacy and information centers, teachers unions, after-school programs, charitable foundations, early childhood intervention and education programs, university or non-profit organization research initiatives, local businesses and corporations, and/or cultural and civic organizations.

Dr. David Lawrence, University Scholar for Early Childhood Development & Readiness at the University of Florida, and Dr. Batya Elbaum, Associate Professor of Education and Psychology at the University of Miami, served as keynote speakers. Dr. Lawrence, former publisher of the Miami-Herald, spoke to the importance of collaboration in building movements for change to serve all children. A powerful example of a collaboration in Miami-Dade County is The Children’s Trust, a partnership forged between the school district and the county’s health department that will result in having health teams in all of the county’s 335 public schools and 50+ charter schools.

During her presentation, “Partnerships with Parents: Motives, Myths, and Measuring What Matters,” Dr. Elbaum spoke about the importance of developing partnerships where leadership is exercised jointly by the school and parents. She shared research that correlates parent engagement and student achievement as well as information about the Parent Leadership Development Project, an initiative funded by multiple partners.

Brucie Ball, Assistant Superintendent, Exceptional Student Education, Miami-Dade County Public Schools; and David Lawrence, Keynote Speaker and University Scholar for Early Childhood Development & Readiness at the University of Florida.

Far right: Loujeania Bost, Project Director of National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, making a presentation at the Spring Collaborative Meeting.
to support the development of parent leaders within the Miami-Dade community. She also spoke of the newly-adopted performance indicator regarding parent satisfaction to which states and school districts will have to demonstrate improvement.

Ten Collaborative member school districts conducted small group presentations related to their successful partnerships: Calgary Board of Education, Dayton Public Schools, Dekalb County Schools, Memphis City Schools, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Milwaukee Public Schools, Newark Public Schools, New York City District 75, School District of Philadelphia, and Waukegan Public Schools.

The Collaborative’s Fall Meeting will be held November 1-4, 2006 in Memphis, Tennessee, and its primary focus will be on designing, implementing, and measuring the impact of response to intervention models.

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their assignment was to photograph what was most meaningful about their school and what they want other people to know. Students shared their pictures and written and/or recorded personal interviews in which they described why each picture was meaningful.

Signature Practices
The major finding of the study is that each school has a school-wide “signature practice,” a way of teaching and learning that pervades every subject area, grade level, and classroom. Signature practices evolve from a school’s commitment to creating school-wide structures and systems that ensure the success of the most vulnerable students. The common theme of the signature practices in the Beacons Schools is equal access to important learning, but each school did so in a way that reflected its unique demographic context. Dolphin Middle School, with the highest percent of special education students, developed co-teaching, which provided the benefit of two teachers in core classes. Carter-Dean, which served two populations, one more affluent than the other, used school-wide investigations and challenging questions. DaVinci, with a large number of English language learners with and without disabilities, used exhibitions in which students could demonstrate competence without the need for extensive language skills.

The Schools
Da Vinci Middle School
Da Vinci Middle School is located in the most densely populated school district in the country. Ninety-five percent of the student population is Hispanic; the majority come from low-income families, and most speak English as a second language. The signature practice developed by Da Vinci gives all students a voice through school-wide exhibitions supported by technology. Beginning in the sixth grade, all students learn to use the Internet to investigate a topic of their choice. Students with disabilities are in inclusive classrooms and present what they have learned alongside their nondisabled peers through PowerPoint presentations. The investigation and exhibition tap intellectual, social, and technological competence, and are not language-dependent.

Carter-Dean Middle School
Carter-Dean Middle School is a magnet school in St. Louis, with 60 percent African American students from poor inner-city families and 40 percent white students from surrounding, slightly more affluent suburbs. Carter-Dean’s signature practice of inquiry-based instruction gives students the tools to engage in rigorous curriculum. In an investigation, students focus all of their content learning on one big topic and a few overarching questions of social and...
For example, we hypothesized that schools with a larger special education population might have a larger special education staff, be more efficient, and ultimately be more effective academically. Another variable was the number of students with disabilities being exempted from participation in state assessments.

Our goal was to explore variables potentially linked to performance for students with disabilities since that information might influence how we consider school improvement initiatives for these students. The findings might allow education administrators to direct their attention and resources to the elements of schools that are most likely to have an impact. At the same time, the findings might force schools to recognize that the performance of students with disabilities is not simply or completely a reflection of each individual child’s needs but is also influenced by broader school-level factors.

For our study, we analyzed data from two school districts in Maryland. The data included school-level demographic and reading and math performance data collected over three years at every testing grade in elementary and middle schools. These districts were chosen due to their demographic diversity, history of implementing standards-based reform, and maintenance of comprehensive databases on students with disabilities and their participation and performance on state assessments.

**Discussion of Findings**

In our analyses, the single most consistently significant predictor variable across local education agencies, grade levels, and content areas, was the performance of the general education students: Schools that got good results for students without disabilities also tended to get good results for students with disabilities.

This finding can be important when considering the achievement of students receiving special education services, because traditionally special education teachers were viewed as solely responsible for those students’ performance. The success of students with disabilities, as well as their difficulties, is usually linked to special education variables such as the type of intervention or service delivery model in a particular school. Viewing the achievement of students with disabilities in terms of general school-wide variables shifts the “ownership” of special education students’ success to a broader set of educators. This finding of a relationship between the performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessments and their general education peers merits further exploration and is the focus of ongoing research by researchers of EPRRI.

Also noteworthy was the lack of significance of certain factors in predicting the performance of students with disabilities. Specifically, the percent of students qualifying for free and reduced price meals at each school was, in all cases but one, not significant when other demographic and performance variables were accounted for. The proportion of students with disabilities within a school was also not a significant predictor. This means that having large populations of students with disabilities located within a building did not bring down the level of performance of students with disabilities in that school, nor did it have the effect of raising the level of performance of students with disabilities due to concentrated special education resources.

The percent of students with disabilities exempted from specific tests also did not predict a significant amount of the variance in the performance of students with disabilities on the tests. That is, schools that tended to have exempted more students with disabilities from the assessments did not have higher performance
among the students who did take the test. Because high exemption rates were spread across schools and grade levels—not confined to schools that housed special education centers—we do not believe that the schools with high exemption rates were simply those schools with the highest needs populations of special education students. In addition, because of our large sample size, we were able to control for varying rates of participation and verify that the percent of students with disabilities participating in a specific assessment did not, in any case, predict level of proficiency for that subgroup of students.

The finding that schools appear to make a difference confirms one of the underlying assumptions of the new accountability system as formalized through NCLB; that is, student performance is influenced by the entire school. Focusing accountability solely on individual children’s performance can end up “blaming the victim” for failure as opposed to recognizing the responsibility and impact of all the faculty and staff in a school. Instead, educational results are “co-produced” by students and teachers. Our findings support this concept as they make evident the complex mix of factors that must be considered as states and school districts work to improve the results for students with disabilities.

This article has been adapted from the research paper: Malmgren, K. W., McLaughlin, M. J., & Nolet, V. (2005). Accounting for the performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessments. Journal of Special Education, 39, 86-96. For a complete version of the paper, please visit http://drjc.gmu.edu/policy.htm

For more information about EPRRI, please visit www.eprri.org

Building Model Dropout Prevention Programs for Students with Disabilities

This spring, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) planned and hosted the National State Education Agency Forum: Building Statewide Initiatives in Dropout Prevention for Students with Disabilities. The forum was held in Clemson, SC, on May 7-9, 2006, with 22 different state teams and a total of more than 100 attendees. The ultimate goal was to assist states in building model prevention programs within their local school districts.

The forum supported states in building capacity in the area of dropout prevention for students with disabilities by providing state teams with examples of evidence-based models and promising practices, presenting research-based information, providing the context for national accountability for dropout and graduation indicators, and providing an opportunity to discuss common issues associated with dropout prevention.

Forum proceedings and Podcasts of the sessions will be available on NDPC-SD’s Web site this summer.

For more information, please visit http://www.dropoutprevention.org/NDPC-SD/index.htm
grow and become socially competent. Rules are clearly stated, posted, taught, and uniformly reinforced. Behavior management is proactive rather than reactive, catching students’ good behavior rather than chasing after inappropriate behaviors. Students feel safe and valued within these schools. We found it just as critical to teach teachers sound principles of behavior as to teach children social skills.

10) Positive collaborative relationships with families exist. Families play a major role in the education of their children, but it must be recognized that impoverished families are at a distinct disadvantage compared to wealthier families. The onus for children’s learning must not weigh heavily on poor families. Families with limited skills or resources will not be as effective in preparing their children for school or in assisting their children in their schoolwork as more affluent parents. Children from impoverished backgrounds come to school with far fewer language/readiness skills than their more affluent counterparts (Hart & Risley, 1999). In our work we found cases of parents who a) had very limited skills or did not read or write in any language (especially English language learners’ parents), b) were too encumbered with daily survival to devote time to teaching academic skills, or c) were unaware of how they might foster the readiness/academic skills in their children. Parents who cannot read, for example, are not going to teach their children to read.

Urban schools will have to bridge that gap. Teachers must work to improve the options for poor children by providing secondary and tertiary effective interventions such as those noted in item 6 and described in our text. Additionally, school personnel should launch effective home-school collaborative projects so that parents can become more active partners in the schooling of their children. Schools will enjoy more respect and responsiveness from urban families as these families see their children making good academic and social progress.

11) Students are affirmed and nurtured. All children have their own strengths, talents, and special interests, and poor, urban students are no exception. Since they may not have many enrichment experiences at home or in their communities, it is important that schools make a deliberate effort to seek out these students from the point of school entry and to nurture their abilities. Teachers need to capitalize on these students’ strengths and interests as a means of affirming and motivating them to remain engaged in school.

Urban learners, despite their challenges, can and deserve to learn well. Based on our decade-long research, we endorse the forth mentioned 11 principles as effective urban school practices to promote the success of urban learners and to prevent and diminish their disproportionate representation in special education and disciplinary referrals. To summarize, important features of such urban schools include leaders as experts, curricula reflecting needs of urban populations, strongly committed personnel, prevention and teaching as top priorities, effective academic and behavioral interventions, high expectations, data-driven decision making, collaboration with families, and affirmation of students’ strengths and interests.

References
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**New Collaborative Members**

The Collaborative currently links 103 school districts from 29 states plus the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Calgary, Canada. Four school districts have joined since January 2006. Please join us in welcoming:

**Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools**  
**Round Rock Independent School District**  
**Inkster Public Schools**  
**San Francisco Unified School District**

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

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scientific importance. Together, over about 12 weeks, students and teachers in an entire grade level study the topic and share their thinking and knowledge. Inquiry-based instruction helps to establish parity among students who come from different educational backgrounds.

**Dolphin Middle School**

Dolphin Middle school students are a culturally diverse, low-income population. Over half of the students are Latino; some families are long-term residents and many are recent immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America. Many of the Latino students are children of agricultural workers. In fact, migrant students make up close to 25 percent of the students each year. Close to a third of Dolphin students are African American and Black Caribbean. The rest of the students, about 10 to 12 percent in recent years, are white. Poverty is a common thread, with a large majority of students on free and/or reduced-price lunch. Dolphin’s signature practice is cooperative classroom teaching in inclusive classrooms. A general educator and a special educator work together in classrooms for core subjects. While the general educator introduces the content knowledge, the special educator infuses the lessons with specific strategies including word maps, summaries, and graphic organizers. They take turns leading the class and working individually with students and/or groups of students. Common planning time allows the teachers to match students’ learning needs with content.

**Cross-Site Findings**

Each Beacon school demonstrates the power of local invention. The signature practice stems from a vision of success for all students and creates a path to knowledge that serves all students. Each partnered with an organization that provided an anchor for the signature practice: Dolphin, the National Forum’s model of middle-grades education and inclusive practices; Carter-Dean, the Schools for Thought model of inquiry-based learning; and Da Vinci, the Coalition of Essential School’s model. Each school provided school-wide professional development aligned with its vision and school reform partner. Each provided structures such as common planning time and release time to allow teachers to work together. Each provided members of the learning community with a language of learning associated with its reform partner. Each school took its own locally developed path to excellence, but all created a single signature practice that allowed all students to achieve success.

*For more information, please contact Ms. Mata Aguilar at cmataaguilar@edc.org.*

Each school took its own locally developed path to excellence, but all created a single signature practice that allowed all students to achieve success.
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