NLTS2 Reveals Major Improvement in Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

Thomas Hehir, Senior Policy Advisor

Many of you are familiar with the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) conducted by SRI International under the leadership of Mary Wagner and funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). This study involved a large representative cohort of students with disabilities, over-sampled for low-incidence disabilities, attending high school in 1987, who were followed two and five years after leaving high school. The study collected a wealth of information about students’ programs, demographics, and outcomes. The study identified factors of school programs associated with better outcomes. When the study was released in 1993, I was director of OSEP and welcomed the opportunity to have empirical data to guide the administration and policymaking of the office. In 2000, the Department of Education commissioned the replication of this study, with information to be collected over 10 years. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) has begun to produce data and reports that should be of interest to all educators.

The original study provided a comprehensive though, in some areas, rather disturbing picture of the educational and attainment status of youth and young adults with disabilities. On the positive side, the study showed higher levels of employment and post-secondary education participation rates than we previously believed existed. However, these levels continued to be unacceptably low, with dropout rates very high for certain categories of disability, including serious emotional disturbance (SED) and learning disabilities. The study painted a very distressing picture of the education of students with SED, with many reported to be in segregated classes and few receiving counseling or social work services. The study also revealed that many students with disabilities had very different course-taking patterns from their non-disabled peers, with few accessing challenging academic curricula. The glass was certainly less than half full.

An important aspect of the 1987 study was its ability to identify variables that were statistically associated with better results for students with disabilities. There were students within this sample who were doing well. The variables associated with school programs identified by the study contributed to better results (school completion, employment, and post-secondary participation) and included integration, focused high school programs (either academic or vocational), family participation, access to challenging curriculum,
NLTS2 Reveals Major Improvement in Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

and appropriate supports. Variables associated with poorer outcomes included a history of students failing courses, segregation, and dropping out. These findings helped shape the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which required students to have access to the curriculum, be part of accountability systems, and have specific needs met through their IEPs, such as positive behavioral interventions.

First and foremost, NLTS2 has documented major improvements in outcomes for students with disabilities. The post-secondary participation rate for students with disabilities has doubled since 1987, with 32 percent of students with disabilities attending either a two- or four-year educational program two years after high school completion. Although this rate is far below that of non-disabled students, it represents major progress. Great strides have also occurred in the area of employment, with approximately 70 percent of students with disabilities having been employed for pay two years out of high school.

There is also positive news in the area of programming. Students with disabilities are more integrated and much less likely to be educated in a separate facility than in 1987. Further, there is a “dramatic increase” in the number of students taking higher-level courses associated with post-secondary education, including science and foreign languages. Although outcomes continue to be less than acceptable for students with emotional disturbance, there have been some dramatic improvements in service delivery. For example, NLTS1 documented that only 20 percent of these students were receiving behavior intervention services or mental health services. NLTS2 revealed that in both of these areas the provision of these services is approximating the 50 percent level. Further, these students are being integrated much more than they were in 1987.

NLTS2, like NLTS1, was able to identify characteristics of student programs associat-
Collaborative Member Districts Celebrate Inclusive Schools Week!

Collaborative member school districts along with many others across the country celebrated the 5th Annual National Inclusive Schools Week, December 5-9, 2005. Co-sponsored by the Collaborative and Education Development Center, Inc., the 2005 Week focused on the need to narrow the achievement gap for students of diverse abilities and backgrounds through the development of schools that integrate special education supports into the curriculum and affirm students’ rich cultures. Examples of Collaborative member districts’ celebrations included the following:

- **Los Angeles Unified School District (CA)** gave awards to schools that have increased opportunities for students with disabilities to be in general education and to those that reduced suspensions. The event included a presentation on the organizational structures that make inclusive education work.

- **Hartford Public Schools (CT)** issued a proclamation declaring the first week in December as Inclusive Schools Week in this district. Assistant Superintendent Romain Dallemend also organized a community celebration to honor the nominees and recipients of the “Inclusive Person of the Year” awards to educators and parents who are providing exceptional leadership in creating inclusive schools and classrooms. The Collaborative’s Executive Director, Dr. David Riley, attended the awards ceremony and dinner and introduced the keynote speaker, Dr. William Henderson of the Boston Public Schools.

- **A high school in Jersey City (NJ)** celebrated with journal entries and class discussions on various biases.

- **Clark County School District in Las Vegas (NV)** planned a variety of student activities. The following are just a few examples:
  - Hands Across the School: Students were given a paper cutout of a hand. They wrote a few sentences about what inclusion means to them and these messages were displayed around the school.
  - Plants: Students in each classroom selected a plant that represents their class. They discussed or wrote about how the plant is a metaphor for their class and then planted it in the school courtyard next to a stake with their room numbers.
  - Poster Contest: Students created posters of “What Inclusion Means to ME!” Each class voted on the best poster from their class.

- **Pittsburgh Public Schools (PA)** Program for Exceptionalities hosted an expo to celebrate the successes of inclusive classroom practices, student work, and various programs.

- **Fairfax County Public Schools (VA)** participated for the 5th consecutive year with numerous activities: book displays in the media centers; parent coffees; “Morning News” clips and promotions by students for students; special raffles for teachers who shared their favorite success stories about inclusion; differentiated instruction workshops with occupational therapy and ESL teachers; celebratory buttons, ribbons, magnets, and banners promoting inclusive practices; and much more.

A record number of partners and sponsors extended their support to promoting the benefits of inclusive schools, and more Celebration Kits (60,000+) were disseminated than ever before. The Week continues to be a wonderful opportunity to highlight ways schools and communities can be more welcoming of children and youth with and without disabilities. Please save the date for the 2006 celebration: December 4-8, 2006!
The Education Policy Research Reform Institute (EPRRI), with funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs, investigates the impact of educational accountability reforms on students with disabilities and the programs that serve them. EPRRI’s latest Topical Review, *The Role of Accommodations in Educational Accountability Systems*, provides valuable insights into how accommodations are used by students with disabilities on statewide tests and the implications of their use for accountability systems. In addition, this report contains an analysis of accommodation policies in EPRRI’s four core study states (California, Maryland, New York, and Texas), which are illustrative of the range of accommodation policies currently in operation in the U.S.

Federal legislation, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, recognize that certain students with disabilities need and are entitled to assessment accommodations to meaningfully access state assessments. Assessment accommodations can be defined as changes in assessment materials or procedures designed to address aspects of students’ disabilities that interfere with the demonstration of knowledge and skills on standardized tests.

Accommodations can be divided into five categories: 1) presentation, 2) equipment and material, 3) response, 4) scheduling/timing, and 5) setting. The purposes of accommodations are to 1) eliminate barriers to meaningful testing, thereby allowing for ties in state and district assessments, and 2) increase the validity of a test score and...
Since its inception, Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources (LASER) has been committed to urban children, families, and communities. The project officially ended in December 2005, and we are proud of the project’s legacy. Little did we know the extent to which LASER would evolve beyond merely providing technical assistance to becoming a family of individuals concerned with the educational outcomes of urban children and youth. Without question, LASER staff and stakeholders have worked diligently to advance a national urban special education research agenda beyond the dominant cultural lens through which urban children and families are typically viewed.

Over the five-year, federal funding period, Project LASER has awarded mini research grants to 32 junior faculty members, associate research grants to 35 mid-level faculty members, and senior research award grants to seven senior faculty members. In addition, LASER has supported 11 doctoral students pursuing a degree in special education at the University of South Florida. It has also provided professional development opportunities for graduate students at other universities to attend LASER events.

LASER also has hosted and sponsored an array of professional development opportunities over the past five years. Most notably, we have sponsored the National Urban Education Research Conference, which was held annually in the following cities: Tampa, Houston, and San Diego. The conferences provided a forum for scholars to address relevant issues impacting urban special education research and practice, with urban community members always included in the discourse. LASER supported practitioners in their efforts to increase their cultural competence through the creation of “reality teaching workshops,” which featured actual teaching demonstrations. LASER faculty grant recipients also presented their research and networked with other scholars from across the nation.

Another essential component of the work of LASER is the professional development provided in the form of think tanks. Designed to help scholars build and maintain research agendas and collaborations with other scholars nationally, ten sessions were held in San Francisco, Tampa, Honolulu, Norfolk, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, San Juan, New Orleans, and Miami. Editors from leading journals in the areas of urban education, special education, and teacher education facilitated discussions with scholars and provided critical feedback.

We are encouraged that LASER’s legacy will be sustained as our scholars continue to disseminate their work. LASER has produced a series of practitioner briefs in the areas of language and literacy, assessment, math and science, and creating culturally responsive classroom environments. These briefs provide educators with research in teacher-friendly language and practical tips for enhancing classroom instruction to benefit all learners. In addition, the research of LASER faculty members will be synthesized into research briefs that will be made available on LASER’s Web site this spring. The research briefs underscore the need for further resources and support to build the capacity of minority-serving institutions to promote research, which directly impacts the lives of urban children.

For more information on Project LASER, please contact Dr. Brenda L. Townsend, Project Director, at btownsen@tempest.coedu.usf.edu, and check out the LASER Web site at www.coedu.usf.edu/laser.
Closing the Special Education Achievement Gap

Carolyn Riley, William Kelley, and Jane Sullivan, Directors of Unified Student Services, Boston Public Schools

The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the emphasis on accountability for all students focused the attention of leaders in Boston Public Schools (BPS) and other urban school districts across the country on accelerating improvements for students with disabilities. Despite steadily improving district test scores in BPS, a persistent gap exists between the performance of students in special education and the performance of general education students.

During the 2003–2004 school year, BPS Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant asked the Unified Student Services Team to participate in a sub-group of his Leadership Team to address his concerns about the performance of special education students on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

This sub-group included Dr. Payzant’s chief of staff, a deputy superintendent, two principals, and, because of the importance of this issue, Dr. Payzant himself. The goal of the sub-group was to identify best practices that could be put in place to close the gap between students with disabilities and their general education peers. Dr. Payzant asked us to take the lead in examining this problem and to present our findings to the rest of the sub-group. We began by examining statewide data to compare the performance of BPS students with disabilities to students with disabilities across the state. We also analyzed district-level MCAS data and compared passing and proficiency rates among students with disabilities to the performance of other categories of students within the district. School-based data were analyzed at the elementary, middle, and high school levels to compare schools’ improvement in the aggregate to their improvement among students with disabilities.

Based on these data, we were able to identify schools and classrooms that were demonstrating significant progress toward closing the special education-general education achievement gap. We recommended that the members of the sub-group visit these schools to talk with principals, headmasters, teachers, and other school staff about specific strategies and practices they were employing that could be shared across the district.

These visits provided us with some valuable lessons. We were able to identify common factors that were consistent across schools where the data for students with disabilities demonstrated positive outcomes. In these schools:

- School leaders and general and special education teachers held high expectations for their students and themselves.
- Special education teachers believed that their students could succeed and were persistent in their efforts to provide students with every opportunity to do so.
- Students were actively engaged in their own learning and were provided with full access to grade-level curriculum.

In order for student achievement to occur, we learned that the following factors are critical:
• The role of the principal is key. A principal’s expertise in special education and his or her support and expectations for students in special education make a tremendous difference. The leaders in these schools looked for the same standards of practice in special education classrooms as they did in general education classrooms. They also did not view special education as something separate and apart from their whole-school improvement efforts.

• Special education teachers must have a thorough understanding of the curriculum. This is in addition to knowledge of an array of strategies that support the achievement of students with disabilities.

• Teachers must employ appropriate accommodations on a daily basis. This includes instructing students on specific test-taking skills. School personnel must also be trained in administering alternate assessments to students with particular disabilities.

• Paraprofessionals who work with students in special education have the capacity to enrich classroom instruction. These paraprofessionals also need training and support to become highly qualified.

• Special education is integral to the culture of the school. Special educators are included in all school-wide professional development and participate in leadership activities. Special education teachers have time to interact with general education teachers and participate in grade-level and curriculum teams. In many of the schools we visited, special education teachers were actively involved in school improvement efforts and instructional leadership teams.

• A positive school climate is linked to improved student achievement. Many of the schools had been engaged in extensive professional development in either “cooperative discipline” or other school-wide positive behavioral approaches. Students and staff responded positively to environments that enabled everyone to feel “capable, connected, and contributing” (Albert, 2003) to the school community. All adults reinforced these principles in classrooms and common areas.

Accountability standards for special education students are very recent. The demonstrated success of these schools has proven that the achievement gap can be closed and that students with disabilities can meet these standards when they are given access to high-quality instruction and the appropriate supports.

During the 2004-2005 school year, the administrative sub-group began to work with more than 30 schools to improve instruction for students with disabilities by providing intensive professional development to teachers and school leaders based on the study’s findings. We provided multiple forums for school leaders and teachers to share best practices. Several of the schools presented to the entire district leadership at a BPS Principal Institute.

During the 2005-2006 school year, we added another 15 schools to the initiative. We have also begun to collaborate with other key central office leaders to ensure that BPS policies and practices support improved outcomes for students with disabilities and that special education teachers are included in all district professional development activities.

Finally, the superintendent has continued to make closing the special education-general education achievement gap a district priority. The most recent MCAS results for the district have provided some evidence that we are on the right track, given that students with disabilities demonstrated the most progress of all sub-groups. We strongly believe that the best strategy for maintaining high expectations for students with disabilities is to continue to demonstrate evidence of success.

Reference
Commentary

Lauren Katzman, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Special Education Program, Boston University

I asked the following question of 24 students in two public high schools in a large, eastern urban school district who participated in a 10th grade state assessment exam, that they must pass to be eligible for a high school diploma: Are students with disabilities prepared to pass states’ high-stakes tests? Their answer was clear. The majority of students I interviewed, all of whom had either an identified learning disability or emotional disturbance, did not believe that they had learned about in school what was assessed on the exam. Additionally, the students explained that they did not know about the testing accommodations to which they were entitled, which potentially limited their ability to access the tested material.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s policy of requiring students with disabilities to participate in state and district assessments seeks to ensure that they are included in all facets of school reform and that they are held to high academic standards. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 uses assessment scores to hold schools accountable for the education of all students, in aggregate, as well as disaggregated by such factors as disability status. State laws, such as those in the state where I conducted this research, use assessment scores to hold students accountable. The combined use of these policies is new, and there is a lack of research to inform their implementation. The students I interviewed offered a unique perspective on the policy—a view from the students themselves—and provided qualitative data to add to and enrich the growing body of quantitative data that currently exists on the participation and performance of students with disabilities on state and district assessments.

I began this research with the intent of examining students’ perspectives on two topics often raised when discussing high-stakes testing: motivation and school dropout. However, what students wanted to talk to me about was preparedness. For students in this study, what was important was not only whether they succeeded on the tests, but also how well prepared they judged themselves to be when taking the tests.

Preparedness is a broad concept with myriad meanings. For the purposes of this study, I defined preparedness as (1) the extent to which students had access to the tested curriculum and (2) students’ knowledge of the testing accommodations listed on their IEPs.

If students are exposed to the curriculum and are able to access this curriculum with appropriate accommodations, according to federal and state policies, they are theoretically prepared to pass the assessment. I used course enrollment as a proxy for students’ exposure to the curriculum; that is, if a student was enrolled in geometry, I assumed that the student had some level of access to the geometry curriculum. I also examined students’ knowledge of their testing accommodations to assess the extent to which they had the tools to maximize their ability to access the test.

Access to Mathematics

Students were most concerned with their access to the mathematics curriculum. Serena (not her real name) describes the sentiments of her peers well:

“As my [test] was done, I went to my math teacher, and I was like ‘Mister, you didn’t teach me all...”

...
He was like “Yes, I know, they just want to know do you know it.”
I’m like, how do I know it if the teachers didn’t teach that? I’m in algebra. How they going to give me geometry questions? And he was just like, I don’t know, that’s the [exam]. And I was just like, I don’t know either.

The 10th grade math section of this state exam is comprehensive and comprises material learned in classes through April of 10th grade, when the test is administered. The geometry tested on the exam is purportedly low-level geometry, and the presumption is that the material was covered in earlier grades. Students in the 10th grade who follow a standard course progression would be enrolled in geometry. However, Serena was not. She had taken and failed algebra in 9th grade and was taking algebra again at the time of her exam. And she was not alone. At the time they took the exam, half the students with disabilities in this study were not enrolled in geometry. They either followed Serena’s route and were repeating algebra or had been enrolled in a basic math course in 9th grade and were taking algebra for the first time in 10th grade.

Did students in this study who were enrolled in geometry pass the math portion of the exam at higher rates? In fact, yes; more students who were enrolled in geometry did pass the math portion of the state exam than those who were enrolled in algebra. Simply, those students with disabilities in this study who had access to geometry, the standard 10th grade course, performed better on the math section of the exam than those who did not have access to geometry.

Perhaps it is the case that those not enrolled in geometry were not ready for the course. If this is so, what would be the rationale for students taking the math section of the exam prior to their being fully prepared? As educators, we know that students should only be assessed for curriculum they have covered. Students with disabilities should be assured that they have been exposed to curriculum that is similar to what is covered on the test, as is the case for their peers without disabilities.

**Knowledge of Testing Accommodations**

I looked at students’ knowledge of their testing accommodations to determine the extent to which they had the tools to maximize their ability to access the test. Testing accommodations are used to provide a level playing field for students with disabilities, allowing their knowledge, not their disability, to be assessed. Offering extended time on a test for students whose disabilities affect their rate of reading is an example of a testing accommodation that can help correct distortions caused by a disability. When I queried students about their experiences with their accommodations, students were either unaware that they had accommodations or were inaccurate in what they believed their accommodations were. Students interviewed did not know if they had any accommodations when taking the state exam, and not one student could accurately name the testing accommodations that were listed on his or her IEP.

Why is this important? First, these responses raise the question of whether students were actually receiving their testing accommodations. I cannot provide an answer to this question because I did not observe students taking the exam. However, these student interviews make clear that it is an important question to consider. Current research on accommodations focuses on how accommodations support students to better access the curriculum—not on whether students receive the accommodations. Second, accommodations are a means of providing the tools for students to minimize the impact of their disability and maximize their ability to access the curriculum. According to the data

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**Students with disabilities should be assured that they have been exposed to curriculum that is similar to what is covered on the test, as is the case for their peers without disabilities.**

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New Directions in Special Education: Eliminating Ableism in Policy and Practice

This book is based on my optimistic view that education holds great promise as a vehicle by which individual children with disabilities can gain access to greater opportunity while at the same time promoting a society that values the equality of all its disabled citizens. In this way, education can continue to change society while opening up educational opportunities to all children. (page 11)

In this new volume published by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Collaborative’s Senior Policy Advisor Thomas Hehir examines the ways that cultural attitudes about disability systematically distort the education of children with special needs and uses this analysis to lay out a fresh approach to special education policy and practice. Dr. Hehir examines the roots of “ableism,” a form of discrimination against people with disabilities. He assesses recent trends in special education policy, particularly the shift of emphasis from compliance to outcomes, and discusses in depth the successes and limitations of the inclusion movement. He also investigates the impact of standards-based reforms on children with disabilities and critically examines the promise of universal design for learning.

Dr. Hehir is currently Professor of Practice and Director of the School Leadership Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Prior to his appointment to the Harvard faculty, he served for six years as the Director of the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. He previously served as Director of Special Education in the Boston Public Schools and Associate Superintendent for Special Services in the Chicago Public Schools. Drawing on the personal narratives of successful adults with disabilities, he outlines principles for decision-making about special education at every level, from the family to the classroom, school, and district, as well as recommendations for state and federal policy. ■

For more information and to purchase, please visit http://gseweb.harvard.edu/hepg/newdirections.html.

New Collaborative Members!

The Collaborative currently links 104 school districts from 28 states plus the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Calgary, Canada. Eight school districts have joined the Collaborative since August 2005. Please join us in welcoming:

- Everett Public Schools, Everett, MA
- Prince George’s County Public Schools, Upper Marlboro, MD
- Chesterfield County Public Schools, Richmond, VA
- Waukegan Public Schools, Waukegan, IL
- San Antonio Independent School District, San Antonio TX

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

2006 Harvard Institute on Critical Issues in Urban Special Education

Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools

July 18-22, 2006

For more information, visit www.gse.harvard.edu/ppe/k12/index.html.

You’re Invited!
Collaborative Member Dinner at the Harvard Faculty Club
July 19, 2006
Continued from page 4

**The Role of Accommodations in Educational Accountability Systems**

make the measurement of a specific construct comparable across students with and without disabilities.

The report includes the following key findings:

- Many teachers do not currently have the knowledge and skills to appropriately make decisions about the use of accommodations for instruction or assessment.

- There is rarely a link between accommodations used in instruction and accommodations used in assessment.

- It is likely that the controversy surrounding the appropriate use of accommodations will continue as more states adopt high school exit exams.

- There is a desperate need for further research into which accommodations are appropriate to use, when their use is allowable, and their validity.

- The need for accommodations would be drastically reduced if future tests were designed in ways that permit more students to easily access them. Such assessments, known as universally designed assessments, are being developed to permit the participation of the widest range of students without compromising the reliability or validity of assessments.

*Copies of this report are available from EPRRI’s Web site: www.eprri.org.*

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**Are Students with Disabilities Prepared for High-Stakes Tests?**

gathered in this account, these students’ ability to maximize their level of preparedness for the state exam appears to have been limited.

The goal of requiring students with disabilities to participate in state and district assessments is to ensure that these students are included in all facets of school reform and that they are held to high academic standards. The implications of this study’s findings suggest methods of thinking strategically about how to realize high academic standards for students. It is my hope that this research contributes to a better understanding of the consequences of high-stakes testing for adolescent students with high-incidence disabilities by examining the policy and practices from the perspective of the students themselves. Further, I hope that this study expands the debate from a focus on student ability and motivation to include questions about schools’ capacity to prepare students with disabilities for large-scale assessments.

*For more information, please contact Lauren Katzman at lkatzman@bu.edu.*

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**Special Thanks to the Collaborative’s 2005 Corporate Partners**

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4GL School Solutions is a leading provider of comprehensive, special education management solutions to top-tier school districts across the United States. For more information, visit www.4glschools.com.

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*For more information about the Collaborative’s Corporate Partnerships please visit our Web site at www.urbancollaborative.org.*
Promote Inclusive Practices All Year!

Whether you are planning ahead for National Inclusive Schools Week 2006, or trying to spread the word that inclusive practices benefit ALL students, all year, our posters, pencils, and bumpers stickers are excellent promotional tools. Resell them as a fundraiser for your school, distribute them during your professional development sessions, or share them with your students and parents. To order materials, please visit www.inclusiveschools.org.

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Standard No. 2 pencil, metallic blue with silver lettering.

Inclusive Schools Bumper Stickers

Save the Date!

6th Annual National Inclusive Schools Week
December 4-8, 2006

Please visit our Web site for more information: www.inclusiveschools.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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