David Riley: A New Role in a 40-Year Journey of Improving Outcomes for Diverse Learners

By Kimberly Anna Elliott

In November, David Riley stepped into a new role as Senior Advisor of the Collaborative, and Lauren Katzman became the Executive Director. David’s new role marks another milestone in a long, illustrious career journey that has been dedicated to serving others.

Early on, David’s expertise, vision, and passion to improve outcomes for diverse learners prompted federal leaders to tap him to serve as an advisor to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs. He has led and co-led myriad federally-funded initiatives, including the National Institute for Urban School Improvement and the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems. For the past 11 years, he was a partnership leader for the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities. In Massachusetts, David was in the vanguard of shaping systems to meet the needs of students with disabilities. From the mid 1970s, when the state passed Chapter 766, to today he has contributed to groundbreaking state initiatives, committees, task forces, and advisory groups.

In tandem with Collaborative members and his team, David has carried out strategic efforts to improve the quality and equity of urban education since he founded the Collaborative in 1994. Nationwide, hundreds of district and school leaders, educators, and state education agency leaders have worked side-by-side with David to strengthen systems that serve diverse learners and to carry out strategic plans to close opportunity gaps.

Hundreds of thousands of students have benefited from David’s vision for the Collaborative and its work.

When you put David in the hot seat and ask him which of the Collaborative’s many accomplishments make him the most proud, he has a quick answer. He reflects upon the connections with colleagues—learning together, sharing challenges, exchanging strategies—that form the living bedrock of the Collaborative. In his leadership of the Collaborative, he has seen the powerful role that fostering these connections can play in advancing urban special education leaders’ efforts to improve systems, services, and supports for diverse learners:

“I worked in urban school districts, and historically the role of special education administrator was...
Dr. Lauren Katzman is the newly appointed Executive Director of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative, having assumed this role in November, upon the retirement of David Riley, who founded and for 21 years led this unique national membership organization. Lauren earned her Ed.D. degree at Harvard Graduate School of Education and her Master’s from Bank Street Teachers College. She was a longtime member of the Collaborative, having been the Assistant to the Superintendent for Special Education in the Newark (NJ) Public Schools and Executive Director of Special Education in the New York City Department of Education. She also served as associate professor at Boston University, where she developed and taught special education courses for students majoring in special education, general education, and educational administration. Her research focused on effective inclusive schools and you can find this work in the book Effective Inclusive Schools: Designing Successful Schoolwide Programs. Lauren taught in public schools for 14 years as a special education teacher, starting in self-contained special education classes and schools and ending helping to create New York City’s first public inclusive middle school.

Ron Felton, the Collaborative’s Associate Director, spoke with Lauren about her background and her vision for the future of the organization:

RON: What was the catalyst for your entry into the field of Special Education?

LAUREN: There are two things that guided me into this field. First, special education is a family business. My aunt was a special educator and a professor; another aunt was a first grade teacher, then a principal and is currently a superintendent. Both aunts also have daughters in the field of special education. I have a sister who works with students with autism and another sister who created and runs a therapeutic horseback riding program. It truly is a family business. Additionally, there are a number of members of my family, including me, who have disabilities and are strong advocates for inclusive education. It seems I was destined to go into this field.

I made the decision to become a special educator when I was a student teacher working with second graders. While in this class I was told I had to send any child identified as having a disability out of my classroom to someone who was certified to educate them. This frustrated me and led to the decision to obtain my special education certification so I could focus on including these children in my classroom, allowing me to teach every student in my class.

RON: You have been in the field a long time. What are the changes that have occurred over the past decade or so that you are most pleased about?

LAUREN: Certainly, one of the most important changes is that more students with significant disabilities are being educated in general education environments. We are minimizing the impact of disability while maximizing opportunities for students with disabilities to participate with their peers without disabilities.

Special education has also led the way in expanding knowledge about how children learn, teaching children to read, the development of positive social and emotional supports, the practice of and brain research supporting Universal Design for Learning, and the development of Multi-tiered Systems of Supports. We have also been instrumental in advancing instructional and assistive technologies.

RON: What are the most critical challenges that leaders in urban school systems are facing?

LAUREN: One of most intractable problems in special education is the disproportionate identification of culturally and linguistically diverse students, the subsequent segregation of many of these students in separate special education classes, the disproportional suspension of students with disabilities, particularly those of color, and the pipeline to prison for these same students.

RON: It seems we have been grappling with the issue of over-identification of minority students for around 40 years now. Is there hope that it can be resolved?

LAUREN: Yes, but there must be a collective decision made by those in special education and general education, in collaboration with researchers, policymakers, government, and businesses to focus on the issue.

Disproportionate representation is a reflection of our society and challenges that go beyond education, but schools can be used as levers that can influence change.

continued on page 4
Racial Over-Representation in Special Education Identification, Placement and Discipline is Still Problematic Despite Assertions of Flawed Study

*By Daniel J. Losen, Russell Skiba, Alfredo Artiles, Elizabeth G. Harry, & Elizabeth Kozleski*

Disproportionality in special education, primarily expressed as racial and ethnic over-representation for certain groups, has been among the key educational equity issues in the field for nearly 50 years. When the federal government began providing partial funding for special education, it required states to report the numbers of students identified in each category, including the counts disaggregated by the major racial and ethnic groups. Without controlling for poverty or other risk factors, these raw data demonstrate that Black and American Indian students are, compared to their total school enrollment, disproportionately represented in the categories of emotional disturbance and intellectual disability (previously known as mental retardation). What is often most striking about the data is that some states, and especially some districts, show far higher degrees of disproportionality than others.

This tremendous variation, along with unusually high identification rates by race in these high incidence disability categories is one of the primary indicators of a potential problem. Another is that some districts that at one time were segregated under Jim Crow and ordered to integrate were found to be using education tracking and special education placements to continue unlawful segregation.

Unfortunately, new research authored by Paul L. Morgan, George Farkas, and their colleagues, that appeared in a *New York Times* OP-ED column this summer failed to acknowledge the unusually high levels of disproportionality still found at the district level, and failed to acknowledge that many forms of bias may still be influencing the grouping of students, including, but not limited to, over-identification in some categories of special education as well as under-identification in other categories.

Over- and under-representation in disability categories matters. Over-representation raises questions about false positives, which in turn have repercussions for group misrepresentation, stigmatization, and the potential heightening of racial segregation. These are grave consequences for racial minority students, who already face major structural challenges and reduced educational opportunities. Under-representation is also problematic, as it embodies the possibility of false negatives, which could deny access to needed services for students that have been historically underserved. Disproportionality, therefore, is complex, multidimensional, and highly consequential for educational opportunity, particularly for learners that have been systematically marginalized over time.

So the assertion by Morgan et al. (2015), that the real issue in special education disproportionality is under-representation, and that concerns about over-representation are invalid, is a startling one that might well be expected to create ripples throughout the special education community. A central problem is that their assertion that students of color are in fact under-represented in special education is unconditional. Although their analysis examined no district-level data, they use their results to attack federal disproportionality policy under IDEA 2004, which requires district-level monitoring for over-identification, as “misdirected.” (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 11).

Several leading researchers in the field have raised serious questions about the extent to which the generalizations made by the authors were appropriate and justified, on three main problems:

*continued on page 12*
Disproportionate representation is a reflection of our society and challenges that go beyond education, but schools can be used as levers that can influence change.

RON: Are there other critical challenges for urban leaders?

LAUREN: Another challenge is to make sure that special education leaders have a seat at the table. What this means is that, as district level decisions are being made, students with disabilities are taken into consideration and special education leadership is heard regarding how these decisions might affect students. Many times special education is situated in the district hierarchy in ways that do not put them at the main decision-making table.

RON: How do you see the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative supporting leaders in dealing with those challenges?

LAUREN: First, let me say that David Riley has grown an unbelievable organization for over 21 years with some of the most amazing professionals in the field. I am deeply grateful and honored to be taking the helm of The Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative, continuing and expanding on what he has built. The Collaborative has been an important part of my life and provided great support to me when I was the special education director for New York City and in Newark, New Jersey. I attended meetings or sent representatives from my team who always came back to the district recharged and filled with new ideas. The Collaborative is comprised of a strong group of very smart, savvy, and bold educators and as a member, I had a community of people to whom I could reach out and ask questions. These are folks who unhesitatingly share their knowledge as well as their struggles. I knew that, through the Collaborative, I would find the most up-to-date information from people who are accomplished in their field. The Collaborative offers amazing opportunities to network, problem-solve, exchange ideas and, at times, simply to validate each other. I want to continue to grow these collaborations.

I also remember facilitating the summer Critical Issues in Urban Special Education institutes at Harvard as a student where I learned about cutting-edge ideas and met some of the biggest legends in the field, both in practice and in research. I would like to find ways for our members to collaborate with researchers and policymakers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

RON: What is your vision for the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative?

LAUREN: My vision is that the Collaborative membership will have an impact on special education. We can do this by sharing with each other and influencing the development of knowledge, research, and policy in a way that serves to increase inclusive special education services and decrease the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As always, the goal of special education is to improve outcomes for students with disabilities to succeed in further education, employment, and independent living.

Register Now!

The Collaborative
Supporting Education Leaders Since 1994

Spring 2016 Member Meeting
May 4–7, 2016

Building Capacity to Successfully Educate Students within Urban School Districts

Hosted by: Compton Unified School District
Omni Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

www.urbancollaborative.org
isolated and isolating, much like the educational experience of students with disabilities. These leaders had few professional growth opportunities and, most often, no colleagues in similar roles. In founding the Collaborative, I wanted to connect these leaders, help them tap into their collective strengths and knowledge, and share new research with them on evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for students. In 1994, we had 12 members at our first national meeting, and it has been so gratifying to see the Collaborative grow from that small, yet dedicated, group to 112 members today. We are realizing my vision for the organization. I hear about members contacting each other and saying ‘Gee I met you at the fall meeting and you said you were doing this, can you tell me more? Here’s what I’m trying…’ Even beyond the structure of the Collaborative meetings, members reach out to their colleagues nationwide to deeply explore and then carry out new strategies to better serve diverse learners. That’s what we set out to do, I’m seeing it have an impact on systems and students, and that’s why I got into this business.”

When colleagues discuss David and his contributions to the field, the same words pop up: “Respected, trusted, revolutionary, astute, compassionate, caring, indomitable, insightful, and invaluable.” They point to his ability to always keep people’s eyes focused on the well-being of students amidst a plethora of red tape, pressing reforms, and competing demands. Above all, they talk about his vision, his determination, and his long history of “walking the talk”—standing up for what he believes in, and inspiring and moving others to do the same.

Joanne Brady is a Senior Vice President of Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), the director of the organization’s Learning and Teaching Division in which the Collaborative is based, and David’s long-time colleague. She calls David a true visionary and pioneer, and she praises his foresight in founding the Collaborative:

“David is a gem of a colleague and a human being, and he has made invaluable contributions to both EDC and the field. In both worlds, he is highly respected for his vision and his ability to stay the course. He’s not a person who will be seduced by the latest thing, he is clear about the right of every individual to have a productive role in society, and he is deeply devoted to ensuring that all students have that right. Long before people talked about communities of practice, David was sustaining a strong, vibrant one in the Collaborative. Decades ago, he saw the wisdom of bringing people together who share similar challenges and don’t have peers in their own ecosystems. He knew how beneficial it would be for urban special education leaders to engage in rich, lively professional conversations, and he understood the potential impacts for their students. He has achieved this with the Collaborative, and the work that he does in special education strengthens ALL of education. He always keeps the focus on students, and he never gets distracted from pursuing his mission. EDC and the field owe him a debt of gratitude.”

Ron Felton has a unique perspective on the Collaborative. Prior to serving as Associate Director of the Collaborative, he was a member. From those days, he says that he gained a deep appreciation of David’s commitment to bringing leaders together who share similar challenges and a first-hand understanding of the important role that networking plays in helping leaders improve outcomes for diverse learners:

“David cares a lot about students and deeply understands the relationships between the work that we do and what happens to students. I joined the Collaborative in 1999 when I was in Miami. I started out as a teacher and was suddenly thrust into becoming Executive
More than 270 special and general education leaders representing 70 school districts from 23 states traveled to Minneapolis, Minnesota, in November to attend the Collaborative’s 21st annual Fall Member Meeting. The topical focus of the meeting was Reducing Disproportionality & Expanding Inclusive Practices Through Systems Redesign.

We know that the problem of overrepresentation of students of color in special education, particularly African American males, dates back as far as the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. The issue persists and according to the latest data from the U.S. Department of Education (2012), students of color remain more likely to have a special education classification than children in other racial/ethnic groups, and even now, as more students are included in general education settings, students of color are more likely to be educated in segregated special education settings. Addressing and resolving these issues requires significant systemic change – changes in organizational structure, district and school cultures, and staff behavior.

Dr. Crystal Laura, Associate Professor at Chicago State University, was our powerful keynote speaker. She organized our opening session into three parts: an insightful and impactful presentation on the causes and effects of disproportionality and over-segregation of students of color, engaging facilitated table discussions, and a panel with representatives from four member districts that responded to audience questions and concerns. Dr. Laura, author of Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline, is a professor and co-director of the Center for Urban Research and Education. She focuses her work on teacher education and leadership preparation for learning in the context of social justice with the goal of training school professionals to recognize, understand, and address the school-to-prison pipeline. We encourage everyone to read her work.

In addition to the plenary session with Dr. Laura, the agenda included presentations by eleven member districts on a range of promising initiatives they are implementing to reduce disproportionality, focus on building equitable social-emotional supports, and expanding inclusive practices.

Members addressed such questions as: How is your district using data to monitor potential disparities or inequities? How has your district engaged departments outside of special education (e.g., general education, human resources, English language learners, curriculum, budget) in resolving issues systemically? What leadership practices have been successfully employed to engage all stakeholders in systems redesign and change? What instructional practices and interventions have been...
successfully employed to bring about change (e.g., MTSS, restorative practices, PBIS, cultural competency)? The district that presented include: Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), District 75 New York City (NY), Kalamazoo (MI), Metro Nashville (TN), Minneapolis (MN), New York City Schenectady (NY), San Antonio Independent (TX), San Diego Unified (CA), St Paul (MN), and Tacoma (WA). PowerPoint presentations of these sessions may be found at the Collaborative’s website (www.urbancollaborative.org).

Minneapolis and St. Paul leaders ran two powerful consultancy sessions; one on how to revise the policy for placing students in more restrictive special education settings, and the second on reducing suspensions of students of color. The leaders from the district were engaging and asked tough questions and participants responded with both honesty and respect. Many participants commented that these sessions were highly valuable to the work they are doing in their own district.

**Other highlights of the 2015 fall meeting include:**

* The Size-Alike Session that focused on how to determine what is valid in studies, articles, and popular press regarding disproportionality in special education. An article written by a group of national experts on the topic (unpublished at the time of the meeting), responding to a controversial study recently published in the New York Times, was presented and discussed. *(The article can be found on page three of this edition of Urban Perspectives.)* Participants also watched two videos on the topic; they can be found at [http://go.edc.org/DisproportionalityVideo1](http://go.edc.org/DisproportionalityVideo1) and [http://go.edc.org/DisproportionalityVideo2](http://go.edc.org/DisproportionalityVideo2).

* The opening reception at The Dakota Jazz Club, a local hot spot and stage to nationally-known jazz musicians

* The World Café Session that focused on the 2016 spring meeting in Los Angeles, California, hosted by Compton Unified School District, on Building Capacity to Successfully Educate Students within Urban School Districts, and how to keep students with disabilities in their neighborhood school.
Getting Real: College- and Career-Ready

Gene Bamesberger, Associate Director of Special Education
Brittney Cardwell, Support Partner
Monica Schultz, CTE Work-Based Learning Coordinator
Will Crookston, Support Partner
Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado

The Denver Public Schools (DPS) takes seriously the fact that national and state college- and career-readiness data for students with disabilities are disastrous. In our district, there is a 50% difference between the rate of students with disabilities who graduate and that of their non-disabled peers. The DPS school board’s goal, as stated in the Denver Plan 2020, envisions that the four-year graduation rate for students who start DPS in ninth grade will increase to 90% and that we will also double the number of students who graduate college and are career-ready, as measured by achievement with the increasing rigor of the state standard. It is an ambitious goal, but DPS’ special education leaders ask, “Do our students with disabilities deserve anything less?”

What keeps students with disabilities from graduating at the rate of their peers? DPS’ hypothesis: limited opportunity to access courses that engage their interest and natural aptitudes, curriculum that is either well above or well below their skill levels, and “business as usual” transition planning that provides little guidance for how to translate a dream into a step-by-step plan toward an achievable goal. DPS must address this large achievement gap and engage in a sustained effort to revolutionize the way the district delivers special education services.

The goal of transition planning is to facilitate the student’s move from school to post-school activities. IDEA requires school districts to develop transition plans that reflect a “coordinated set of services” designed to ensure that students with disabilities achieve their dreams and become contributing members of society. One strategy we find essential in accomplishing this goal is to create better alignment within DPS between Special Education and CareerConnect, formerly called Technical Education (http://www.dpscareerconnect.org/). CareerConnect classes include exposure to a variety of workplace environments and intensive skill-building instruction. Data gathered over the last 10 years show that all students who took three or more CareerConnect classes graduated at a rate 30% higher than their peers, including students receiving special education services and students who were English Language Learners. When comparing that data to students with the same income level, neighborhood, race, gender, and eighth grade achievement test scores, the graduation rate is even higher.

Given the strong correlation between CareerConnect and graduation rates, DPS has supported starting new programs in our high schools and the expansion of existing ones on a large scale for all students, not just those with disabilities – a truly inclusive program. The launch of this work is supported by a $7 million Youth CareerConnect (YCC) grant awarded to DPS last year with the goal of providing motivation for students to stay in school. With this funding, DPS is putting into continued on page 9
place significant changes in the way career-focused education is delivered. Classroom practices are coupled with work-based learning, which includes industry exploration events, one-to-one mentoring with industry professionals, internships in STEM companies, and “residencies” designed to provide extensive on-the-job training and industry certifications.

To assure the success of students with disabilities, we have developed the Continuum: College & Career Readiness for Students with Disabilities (http://go.edc.org/ContinuumCCReadinessDPS) a plan that articulates a pathway for students to achieve postsecondary success. Students begin when starting high school by developing a career plan using curriculum that has been developed to help students research career options. They go on job tours, shadow professionals, and attend career days that provide opportunities for students to explore their career interests. Effective transition assessments examine both academic achievement and career readiness in relation to students’ goals. This information helps teachers to determine skills gaps and to provide interventions that focus on skill development as well as the “soft skills” necessary to be successful in careers. At the end of the career exploration phase (tenth grade) students take either the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or the Accuplacer to determine their readiness for postsecondary education and training. (The TABE is an entrance test for training and vocational rehabilitation programs). Students then prepare to actualize their goals through career planning. Skills development continues and students gain experience specific to their career choices through paid and unpaid internships and “residencies.” When appropriate, a referral to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is completed to ensure a smooth transition to competitive employment. These services can continue through the semester of a student’s 21st birthday.

The Continuum: College & Career Readiness for Students with Disabilities adheres to a theory of action that includes the following four components:

1. Specially designed, data-driven instruction to close skills gaps and improve access to the curriculum
2. Increased self-determination for students with disabilities through student-directed Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) with transition development focused on a specific career pathway
3. A foundation for acquisition of 21st century skills
4. Work-based experiences that provide on-the-job training and industry certifications.
5. Working with a focus on these four tenets, we believe, will support the graduation of students who will be well positioned to be independent and contributing members of their communities.

**Specially Designed, Data-Based Instruction to Close the Skills Gap**

Creating IEPs that describe a pathway to postsecondary success requires that educators and parents know a student’s career goals. Good transition assessments identify what aspirations a student has that will help him/her to achieve his/her goals and what the student needs to learn in order to attain them successfully. The IEP is written to identify short-, medium-, and long-range goals. The purpose is to create realistic transition plans that describe a path to the career and get the student started on a trajectory towards continued on page 10...
achieving his/her dream. For example, a student who would like to be a certified auto mechanic may currently read at a fourth grade level. The first short-range goal would be to improve his/her reading skills in order to pass the TABE at the eighth-grade level, making the student eligible to enroll in a certified auto mechanics certification program. To support this work, DPS has added an adult literacy program to its continuum of transition services. Students who have participated in this program consistently have gained an average of 1.6 years’ growth in one semester as measured by the TABE.

Increased Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities Through Student Directed IEPs

It is important that students understand who they are, what they want in life, and what they may need in order to achieve their dreams. Students define their preferences, interests, and career goals through the career planning curriculum. This work culminates in the self-directed IEP where students share their career goals publicly, describing the impact of their disability on their career choices, the accommodations they will need, and the supports they will need from those around them. The self-directed IEP asks students to focus on their interests, strengths and needed supports. (http://go.edc.org/SelfDirectedIEP)

A Foundation for Acquisition of 21st Century Skills

21st century skills describe the competencies that students will need if they are to be successful in the real world and have the ability to compete with their typical peers. We focus on helping our students to be creative problem solvers and to develop the communication skills and digital competencies needed to be a part of a team of people working together to develop solutions to issues. Lesson plans have been developed to help students build their career-specific vocabulary, executive functioning skills, and the use of assistive technology.

Work-Based Experiences that Provide On-the-Job Training and Industry Certifications

Work-based experiences provide the motivation for students with disabilities to continue in school despite barriers they may face. Students are engaged in work experiences that provide training specific to their career choices. For students with more significant needs, DPS provides these experiences in Career Academies that connect students to DPS partners. For example, DPS currently partners with Denver Health to provide work training experiences for students in the healthcare field. Students rotate through a variety of work experiences within the hospital. Students work in central supply, intake, reception, the cafeteria, and on units. In this academy, students earn certifications in CPR, first aid, and blood borne pathogens that help to build their resumes. (Please watch A Bountiful Harvest: Garden of Youth in Denver Public Schools, http://go.edc.org/BountifulHarvestDPSvideo, a video describing one work experience program created in collaboration with the Office of Sustainability in DPS.)

We are expanding this effective work into the high school and, as a starting point, three schools within DPS will be piloting the use of specific supports for students in special education that include: 1) vocabulary building using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, 2) assistive technology to access text in varying formats and to support written expression, and 3) executive functioning supports such as weekly check-ins and classroom
Spring 2016 Meeting to Address Building Capacity

Hosted by Compton Unified School District

The topical focus for the Urban Collaborative’s Spring 2016 Meeting is Building Capacity to Successfully Educate Students within Urban School Districts. This Member Meeting will provide opportunities for members and associates to learn from one another about policies and practices that reflect contemporary understandings of how to build capacity to educate students with disabilities in district, and further, in their neighborhood schools. Participants will hear and learn from a nationally recognized keynote speaker as well as from their colleagues in Member Districts across the country.

We all know individual schools with the capacity to provide strong inclusive and effective special education supports and services for all students. It is more difficult to find school districts with such systemic capacity. Too often districts rely on individual schools, administrators, or teachers to provide effective special education services and supports to some students while others might receive less effective supports in the district or are sent to an outside provider. Also too often culturally and linguistically diverse students disproportionately receive less effective services. Collaborative members have long been emphasizing the need for significant systemic changes that can impact capacity building in order to: improve academic outcomes across the district, equitably increase the delivery of services in more inclusive settings, improve graduation and post secondary options for all students, particularly those with significant mental health challenges, decrease out-of-district placements, and successfully bring students who are in out-of-district placements back into their home school district. Our goal in this meeting is to better understand how to create equitable and effective district-wide, systemic, and inclusive special education supports and services.

Our World Café conversations at the Fall Member Meeting in Minneapolis produced several issues about which our member district leaders are interested in learning more from their colleagues. Among these questions are: How have you developed district capacity with your colleagues who are not in special education? How are fiscal resources used to facilitate or leverage change? How is your district using data to monitor potential disparities or inequities in decisions regarding LRE and inclusion? What leadership practices have been successfully employed to engage all stakeholders in systems redesign and change? The Spring 2016 Member Meeting will seek to provide answers to such questions, synthesize research- and evidence-based practices, and shed light on critical elements of successful models.

Student from Manuel Dominguez High School, Compton Unified School District.
cont. from page 3 - Racial Over-Representation...

...a New York Times OP-ED column this summer failed to acknowledge the unusually high levels of disproportionality still found at the district level, and failed to acknowledge that many forms of bias may still be influencing the grouping of students.

The use of the unrepresentative sample by Morgan et al., was further confounded by serious flaws when controls were added. Researchers have long expressed concern that implicit racial bias may influence perception of Black students behavior and potential, and that such bias contributes to disproportionate recommendations for special education evaluations. Similar concerns are raised in regard to tracking inequities, and the widespread under-representation of children of color in gifted and talented programs. However, Morgan et al., did not consider this potential cause. This is inexcusable, especially in light of the latest research from McArthur’s Genius fellow, Eberhardt, demonstrating that teachers recommend harsher punishments for Black students compared to Whites, even though the behavior is identical. Another serious flaw in the Morgan et al., study was the decision to combine Native Americans, who are typically over-identified, with Asian Americans, who are typically under-identified. These were merged along with other students into a single “Other” category for their analysis. The merging of two subgroups known to be at different ends of the over-representation/under-identification spectrum in a paper purporting to shed doubt as to whether “well established” overrepresentation or racial minorities really exists, is unjustifiable.

Socioeconomic Status as an Explanation for Disproportionality

The authors argue, in their literature review, data analyses, and conclusions, that findings of racial/ethnic over-representation in special education are due primarily to disadvantages associated with poverty. Studies that, like Morgan’s, have relied upon indirect methods of counting special education enrollment from teacher or administrator survey have tended to find that the introduction of socioeconomic status (SES) as an independent variable reduces findings of over-representation to non-significance (or have failed to find over-representation entirely). In contrast, studies relying upon a direct count of special education enrollment have found
that race remained a significant predictor of special education eligibility regardless of the inclusion of variables representing poverty.

Most importantly, however, the results of Morgan et al.’s own hazard analysis showed SES as a significant predictor of special education identification in only 3 of 20 possible tests. Across all five special education categories tested, SES was a significant predictor of identification in three out of four tests under the OHI category, and then in the opposite direction that Morgan et al. would predict. That is, lower SES students are under-represented in the category of OHI—a counterintuitive finding given the high poverty level among these students and the attendant health threats of living in poverty. Simply put, Morgan and colleagues have no basis in their own data for concluding that racial/ethnic over-representation can be accounted for by poverty, since few of their SES variables entered their equation significantly, and none in the direction predicted.

Over-simplification of Complex Relationships

We are not suggesting that minority students are always over-represented. Rather, disproportionality is a complex phenomenon that sometimes expresses itself as over-representation, and sometimes under-representation. The data have always suggested that context matters. Because school districts have the obligation to identify students with disabilities, to place them equitably, and to protect them from unwarranted disciplinary exclusion, what districts actually do or fail to do can make all the difference. Morgan et al.’s failure to recognize this complexity and the importance of each individual district’s context constitutes one of the study’s central flaws. As suggested by the authors’ final paragraph (“Our analyses… failed to yield any evidence that minority overrepresentation is currently occurring”, p. 11), the manuscript treated the issue of disproportionality as an either/or construct. This limited view leads further to their startling policy suggestions that federal policy apparatus in IDEA 2004 that concerns racial disproportionality, necessarily discourages appropriate identification of minority students, and should be ended.

Congress, when it amended the IDEA in 2004, recognized the complexity in the mechanisms through which disproportionality is identified yet maintained the unequivocal requirement and obligation that districts identify every eligible student and provide them with special education. Congress focused on district-level actions only where the local data indicated very high degrees of disproportionality. Equally important, Congress was not just concerned with misidentification, but was equally concerned with racial differences in the restrictiveness of setting and rates of removal from school on discipline grounds. National- and state-level data did gain the attention of members of Congress, but the federal law requires states to monitor school district data, and only requires action if the state determines that a particular district has significant disproportionality with regard to identification, or restrictiveness of setting, or discipline. Morgan et al., would have us believe that federal policy is a broad and sweeping witch-hunt targeting only over-representation in identification and encouraging unlawful quotas limiting the special education access of children of color everywhere. In contrast, the Government Accountability Office (2013) has critiqued the definitional and monitoring processes of the federal government in this area as being too lax, yielding only 2% of all districts nationally, and in many states, zero districts. The evidence of minimal enforcement is a reality that Morgan and his colleagues ignore entirely when they imply that federal policy is driving widespread under-representation. Their study examined data from well before 2004 when Congress made racial disproportionality a priority area for monitoring and enforcement. Moreover, we know their research does not explore any district ever identified with a problem pursuant to federal policy, because they conducted no district analysis whatsoever.
Director of Special Education. With no training, I found myself running the show and had to learn a lot quickly. The Collaborative became my sounding board—which I think is a feeling that lots of other members share. I knew that I could call other members or David and get support and concrete suggestions. My colleagues in smaller districts couldn’t relate to the challenges and issues I was facing, and I felt much more akin to my fellow Collaborative members with large urban districts in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City. They knew what I was going through—they ‘got it’—and David always ‘gets it.’ His insights are absolutely invaluable.

As a person, I’d describe him as a dear friend. As a professional, I’d describe him as ‘perspicacious, clear-sighted, and focused.’ Over all of the years that I’ve worked with and known him, I’ve seen his strong focus on kids help lots of people—myself included—avoid getting caught up in bureaucracy and politics and deal effectively with dilemmas.

Susan Rees, Educational Consultant and Former Executive Director of the ACCEPT Education Collaborative, has been a close friend of David’s for 40 years and worked with him on multiple initiatives in Massachusetts. She shares the transformative influence that David’s staunch advocacy for inclusive classrooms has had on the field and in her life:

“Through his unique ability to translate current research, emerging educational practice and law into hands-on guidance for what educators need to know and be able to do to ensure that students with disabilities thrive, David has greatly influenced generations of special education teachers and administrators across the country. He is always far ahead of the curve in his vision of how to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and he is a staunch advocate for the right of students with disabilities to receive a free, appropriate public education in inclusive settings. For the past 40 years I have used the WWDD (‘What Would David Do?’) framework to help me navigate complex challenges and it—

As Senior Advisor, I look forward to helping the Collaborative chart new courses in strengthening systems to improve education for diverse students.
practice, and shares the tools that we need to refine our practice—given his keen understanding that our work must enhance student achievement. Everyone admires his tireless dedication to redefining urban education by promoting standards that embody excellent services for the most challenged and socio-economically disadvantaged students. He is recognized as a valuable asset to the field as an educator, researcher, and practitioner. His tenacity and courage keep us grounded in our work, and through his leadership of the Mass Urban Project and the Urban Collaborative, he has personally touched the lives of many as he has challenged us to think critically and be compassionate in our sense of purpose. At the end of the day, David reminds us that our students come first and must be at the CORE of all that we do. I was thinking about shifting gears and accepting a position in a suburban district, and I shared my plans with David. His reaction was: “Are you CRAZY? Urban education needs you—you can’t leave!” After 27 years in the field of urban education, I still love the work that I do. I have been blessed to work in the three largest school districts in Massachusetts and the Mass Urban Project and the Collaborative have supported my work every step of the way. My staff, parents, and students have also benefited from the professional learning opportunities. David’s mentorship and friendship throughout these years have been invaluable.”

As he considers his new role as Senior Advisor, David says “I feel really good about where the Collaborative is today. We are one of the few organizations that focus on the leadership of special education programs in urban areas, and it remains crucial to support these key leaders. When our members engage in learning about contemporary research on effectively serving diverse learners—what really works—and share their experiences, it helps them incubate and implement strategies that significantly benefit their students. Our members’ positive energy, commitment, and willingness to explore and apply evidence-based approaches is outstanding. As Senior Advisor, I look forward to helping the Collaborative chart new courses in strengthening systems to improve education for diverse students. Lauren Katzman brings a very strong educational and experiential background in the field, as well as a first-hand and deep understanding of the challenges that urban special education leaders face. I have complete confidence in her as the new Executive Director of the Collaborative, and my hope is that, under her leadership, the Collaborative will find new ways to support members in learning from one another and impact the lives of more and more students.”

During the Saturday morning World Café session, David Riley leads a small group discussion regarding how to build capacity in urban school districts.

**Conclusion**

At the heart of this problem are conceptions of educational equity. Above all, we need an approach to disability research that is situated in social, cultural, and historical context. Simplistic investigations that over-reach both their dataset and their own analyses do little to further our understanding of the very real and consequential problem of the over-representation of marginalized groups in special education, not only with regard to identification in particular categories, but in the restrictiveness of educational settings and in the disciplinary removal from educational opportunity. Future research must transcend arguments that the problem is universally one of either under or over-representation. Meanwhile, educators should continue to address these concerns in districts where the current data suggest they exist and not hesitate to take appropriate action.
The Collaborative currently links together 112 school districts from 29 states. Twelve school districts have joined since June 2015.

Anne Arundel County Public Schools, MD
Brookline Public Schools, MA
Cobb County School District, GA
Fontana Unified School District, CA
Fort Bend Independent School District, TX
Lake Washington School District, WA
North St. Paul-Oakdale-Maplewood District 622, MN
Osseo Area School ISD #279, MN
Robbinsdale Area Schools #281, MN
Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, CA
Vancouver School District 37, WA
Washoe County School District, NV

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