

Superintendent's P-16 Council Makes Progress

Creating Ways to Close the Achievement Gap

California's budget difficulties come at a particularly challenging time for the ambitious P-16 Initiative to Close the Achievement Gap. Launched in 2007 by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, this initiative involved a statewide assembly of education, business, and community leaders who worked to develop a specific plan for creating the conditions necessary to close the achievement gap among students. The initiative began with much energy and promise. Where is it now?

According to José Ortega, Executive Director of the California P-16 Council and Administrator of the P-16 Policy Development Division at the California Department of Education, the initiative is not only alive and well but some of its activities are ahead of schedule.

First, a little history.

In 2007, the P-16 Council set out to tackle the initial task of determining what exactly it would take to close the achievement gap. The council laid out four basic goals that subsequently guided the council members in their work:

- Improve student achievement at all levels
- Link all education levels—

preschool, elementary, middle school, high school, and higher education—to create a comprehensive, seamless system of student learning

- Ensure that all students have access to caring and qualified teachers
- Increase public awareness of the link between an educated citizenry and a healthy economy

Working from these goals, the council developed 14 specific recommendations. (Detailed descriptions of these recommendations can be found at www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/lp/c/documents/yr08ctagrpt0122.pdf.) In 2008, the council moved into its second phase: developing the strategies necessary for implementing its recommendations. This phase included the passage of important legislation, regulatory changes, further research, and the development of key relationships and partnerships.

Today, according to Ortega, the individuals working on the specific activities of the initiative “feel as though they are ahead of the game,” with many of the recommendations already in the third phase: actual implementation. All 14 recommendations stand to benefit all children. However, three of them hold particular significance for children with disabilities and their families: recommendations 1, 3, and 12.

Improving Preschools

In 2008, two bills were passed in support of the first recommendation: Provide High-Quality Prekindergarten Programs. Assembly Bill 2759 (Jones) modified the Child Care and Development Services Act to create the California State Preschool Program. Senate Bill 1629 (Steinberg) established a

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The California Advisory Commission on Special Education: Annual Report

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In the midst of California's budget crisis, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) is providing the state with approximately \$1.26 billion for implementing Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The overall goals of ARRA are to stimulate the economy in the short term and to invest in education and other essential public services to ensure the long-term economic health of our nation. These funds are being awarded as an addition to the annual grant awards that California receives from the U. S. Department of Education, and they are available for expenditure from February 17, 2009, through September 20, 2011. Four principles

guide the distribution and use of the ARRA funds:

1. Spend funds quickly to save and create jobs. California Department of Education (CDE), Special Education Division staff are distributing ARRA funds for implementing IDEA Part B to Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) to avert layoffs, create jobs, and improve student achievement. Each SELPA receives its portion of the ARRA funds through the same formula-driven grant award process as is used with other IDEA grants. The SELPA must sign an assurance after its staff have read and agreed to follow the grant conditions that are included with the grant award.

2. Improve student achievement through school improvement and reform. For example, districts may consider purchasing state-of-the-art assistive technology and conducting subsequent professional development in its use; providing intensive professional development on evidence-based practices for academics and behavior; and funding internal candidates to become certified in speech pathology or to become speech pathology assistants. For additional examples, please visit www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sel/as/leagrnts.asp.

3. Ensure transparency, reporting, and accountability. To prevent fraud and abuse, support the most effective uses of ARRA funds, and accurately measure and track results, recipients must publicly report on how funds are used. The use of ARRA funds is subject to more rigorous reporting requirements than those normally applied to the use of the annual IDEA grant. States are required to track their use of IDEA, Part B, ARRA funds separately from regular IDEA grant funds. The CDE is expected to monitor subgrantees for the quality of their data and their appropriate expenditure of funds.

4. Invest one-time ARRA funds thoughtfully to minimize a "funding cliff." ARRA represents a historic infusion of funds that is expected to be temporary. These funds should be invested in ways that do not result in continuing commitments that are not sustainable after the funding expires.

Generally a district cannot use IDEA funds to reduce its local funding commitment for special education; however, there is an exception in IDEA that allows a district to free up to 50 percent of the difference between its IDEA grant awards from one year to the next. To use this exception, districts must meet the following requirements: 1) they must receive a compliance determination in the category of "Meets Requirements"; and 2) they must not be found to be significantly disproportionate in the ethnicities identified for special education. For more information about ARRA funds and their use, please visit the U. S. Department of Education Web site at www.ed.gov/policy/genlleg/recovery/implementation.html and the CDE Web site at www.cde.ca.gov/fl/aalar. For frequently asked questions (FAQs) specifically pertinent to the use of funds for IDEA Part B, please visit www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sel/as/leagrnts.asp.

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Creative Efforts Help Students with Autism

On August 1993, the California Department of Developmental Services reported a caseload of 4,911 individuals with autism. By 2007, that number had grown to 31,012—a nearly 600 percent increase. Given this trend, it is not surprising that discussions about autism spectrum disorder (ASD) invariably involve money, especially given the recent economic projections for ASD. According to Michael Ganz of the Harvard School of Public Health, the cost of taking care of someone with autism over a lifetime can reach \$3.2 million. Ganz, the author of *Understanding Autism*, reports that this amount of money for an individual, “or \$35 billion for society, consists of medical costs, such as doctors visits, medications and therapies; it consists of non-medical costs, such as adult care, childcare, special education; and it also consists of lost income—both parental lost income and the lost income of people with autism.” With budgets slashed and the number of children requiring autism services increasing, how can social service systems and school districts afford to provide the necessary and legally mandated treatment for this growing population?

On top of this question is the one involving litigation. As soon as they receive the diagnosis of autism for their child, parents often struggle to secure treatment and education that hold out the promise of a happy, independent life for their boy or girl. However, given the relative newness of the research (ASD was only identified in the 1940s) and the very recent spike in the number of people requiring services, it is not uncommon for parents to end up frustrated over their inability to find effective systems that can respond to their child’s needs. Out of this frustration, parents

have clashed with school districts and special education programs—entities that are themselves struggling with limited resources while puzzling over how to address the needs of this exponentially increasing population. If the conflict comes to litigation, it is always expensive.

Facing Challenges Creatively

However, Californians in the Central Valley have taken an inventive approach to addressing the very center of the storm: the nexus of cost, litigation,



Drs. Howard G. Cohen and Ivar Lovaas

and effective intervention services. And while it is rarely easy to develop a program that reconciles diverse interests, and the process for doing it is almost never clear, the results that have emerged from the Central Valley have been exemplary.

In 1994, the Central Valley’s Tri-County SELPA (Special Education Local Plan Area) was reeling in the aftermath of an expensive lawsuit over services for a young boy with autism. The boy’s parents did not think the school district had provided appropriate

services for the child, and they wanted to be reimbursed for services they had sought independently. Managers at the area’s regional center¹, Valley Mountain Regional Center (VMRC), agreed with them. But the school district believed that it was, in fact, providing appropriate services.

Litigation happened.

Legal findings turned largely in favor of the district. However, when it was all over, then-SELPA director Dr. Sandee Kludt knew “this was not the best way to spend our resources,” and she vowed never again to see so much money spent and so much time consumed in court. So she set about finding a way to preclude that possibility.

Despite the fact that Kludt’s SELPA and VMRC had just sat on opposite sides of the courtroom, Kludt requested a meeting with Dr. Howard G. Cohen, VMRC’s clinical director at the time. She wanted to work with Cohen to find a way to stop using money “to line attorney’s pockets,” and instead use it “to get people together” by collaborating and blending funds to best serve children “in the most cost-effective way.” She told Cohen, “We can continue to go down this same road. I know how to prove that our programs and services are appropriate. I can staff for that. Or we can work together and do something different.”

As a result of that meeting, Dr. Cohen convinced VMRC Executive Director Richard Jacobs that closer cooperation and shared funding were worth exploring. Subsequently, key organizations and individuals who worked with, taught, and served children with

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1. Regional Centers are the entities in California designed to serve children and adults with developmental disabilities.

ASD in California's Central Valley—including parents—were brought together. Kludt and Cohen then sold them on the importance of developing a collaborative approach to providing and monitoring effective programs for children with ASD. Continuing to think creatively, they also contacted the very mother who sued the school; they asked her to be part of their effort to design a system for providing effective autism treatment—one that a mother would not be inclined to sue. From here, Autism Connection was born.

Using Persistence

Tara Sisemore-Hester, one of two coordinators of autism services at VMRC, remembers the initial difficulties. "All stakeholders came from different perspectives," she recalls. "But we forged ahead and worked things out on a case-by-case basis." The initial agreement took two years to develop.

VMRC's Jacobs says that what ultimately convinced his agency's senior managers and board of directors was the documented progress that youngsters were making. "It's hard to argue with that kind of success," he says.

Credit for this success belongs in large part to both Cohen and Kludt, says Jacobs. Howard Cohen had proven himself a passionate advocate for children with developmental disabilities and a strong believer in the positive—and life-long—benefits of early intervention services for children. VMRC was already implementing the research-based, intensive, in-home treatment program for ASD that was designed and pioneered by O. Ivar Lovaas from the University of California, Los Angeles (www.lovaas.com) and based on applied behavior analysis (ABA).² In addition, Kludt was a leader among the state's SELPA directors and a former member of VMRC's Board of Directors. Both roles positioned her to understand the policy issues and to sell the idea of shared responsibility.

Making Bold Moves with Money

Probably the most innovative part of the Cohen-Kludt collaborative effort involved money. Legally, a regional center is only obligated to fund services for young children with autism in the Early Start program until they turn three. However, at Cohen's urging VMRC agreed to split the cost of all early intervention services for autism prior to age five—an extra two years. This decision was important for a number of reasons. First, it helped better serve children, since research suggests that the narrow window of time when proven therapies are most effective is between the ages of three and five, especially for language development. Second, the extra funding made it possible for the school system—

They asked the mother to help them design a system she would not sue.

normally the entity that pays for autism services after a child turns three—to afford more and better supports for young children and their families. Third, it gave the regional center a formal role in determining and monitoring autism services for that age group. And finally, more effective services early on would presumably reduce future regional center costs in serving adults with ASD. This presumption was not unfounded. According to the Cambridge Center for Behavior Studies, effective early intervention can substantially reduce the need for specialized services in school and later in life for individuals with ASD. And the average savings to the public organizations that provide services to these individuals can be substantial, ranging, per individual, from \$1,686,061 to \$2,816,535 (www.behavior.org/autism).

Nonetheless, as Kludt recalls, the effort was a brave gamble. "The regional center had to bank on the belief that

investing now would result in money saved in later years," in terms of fewer and less intensive services needed for individuals with autism as adults. "There was also the belief that a collaborative approach would prevent, or lessen, future litigation."

Although Kludt retired in December from her 30-year tenure as a SELPA director, she maintains her passion for building effective systems with "all key stakeholders working collaboratively toward the same end." She encourages other collaborative efforts to be sure to involve parents and to view them as partners. In addition, Kludt encourages educational programs of all kinds to collect outcomes data on students. Important facts—demonstrable improvements in a child's IQ scores, increased language skills, and the ability to function in less restrictive environments and to eventually succeed without an instructional assistant, for example—all "give you something to share with superintendents, with boards of school districts and regional centers. These data show how the money is being spent in cost-effective ways."

Spreading Good Ideas

Other SELPAs, school districts, and regional centers in the state have learned from Autism Connection.

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- In an article published in 2008 by the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts, Drs. Jane Howard and Gina Greene write, "Evidence on the effectiveness of early intensive behavior analytic intervention for autism has continued to mount, with several recent studies largely confirming the findings of the well-known Lovaas (1987) study. In general, those studies showed that competently delivered early intensive ABA produced large improvements in intellectual, communication, and adaptive skills as well as reductions in maladaptive behaviors and autism characteristics in many young children with autism. Many made large enough improvements to move from the delayed to the normal range of functioning."

Arguably, none has learned better than a group in Northern California. Dr. Patrick Maher, the developmental pediatrician at California's North Bay Regional Center (NBRC), is happy to give credit to VMRC for inspiration, guidance, and help in creating his program, Autism Community Team, or ACT. In fact, he was happy he "did not have to start from scratch."

NBRC's ACT received its initial impetus in 2002 when the California Department of Developmental Services (DDS) published its best practice guidelines for autism, and NBRC found itself with money for implementing some of DDS's recommendations. The center decided to focus on four: early intervention, coordinated services, seamless service delivery, and direct and constant family involvement—all things that VMRC had worked for years to develop.

So NBRC followed suit. With guidance from VMRC, Maher brought together SELPAs, county offices of education, family resource centers, vendors, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, behavioral experts, early intervention specialists—nearly everyone concerned about services to children with autism. Together they created collaborative diagnostic clinics within the schools themselves.

According to Maher, before ACT was in place parents had to go to regional centers for certain services, and then to schools for other services. "It was not uncommon for the diagnoses and the recommended treatments to differ at best, and conflict at worst," reports Maher. But the formation of ACT changed all of that. A child's collaborative evaluation team—made up of educators, professionals from the regional center, and parents—now works out of the schools, making the school the only place parents need to go. The process of evaluating a child consists of the school psychologist first administering the ADOS³ and assess-

ing the child in the areas of cognition and speech and language development. After that, the team meets to score the ADOS together. Then educators from the child's school and the diagnostic team meet "along with the parents in the same place. All perspectives are considered," says Maher, who stresses the advantage of "everyone [being] at the same table. Everyone works together to form an agreed-upon service plan that is consistent, efficient, and seamless. This is logical, but in Northern California it is new since 2003—and it has been very successful."

ACT has realized its success for a number of reasons. First, ACT makes it possible for children to be diagnosed—and treated—earlier, thus supporting the all-important early intervention model. Then, ACT effectively coordinates services. Maher recalls that "before we [collaborated], we were very separate. There was a lot of scapegoating—case managers blaming schools for not doing enough, schools blaming regional centers for wanting to dump kids on them. Now as we work together we have come to appreciate each others' limited resources. We understand how educational requirements differ from the requirements that direct regional center services." Finally, ACT has created a structure for sharing not only costs, but other burdens, as well. Maher says that "of course everyone is worried about costs, worried about not having total control but still being responsible for the results. But the advantage of a collaborative approach is that decisions are made jointly, and so these worries end up being shared. And because the parents can discuss issues with everyone at the same time and are witness to how all of the professionals involved are doing their sincere best to determine the best set of services and treatments for their child, they are not worried about being kept in the dark or being deprived of appropriate services. This open process has created greater respect all around."

The trend toward collaboration and blended funding for autism services may be gathering steam. Judy Holsinger, SELPA director for Sacramento County Office of Education, describes a new satellite program in her Natomas School District—one that is co-funded by Alta Resource Center and the district. In this program, all specialists work with case managers to coordinate autism interventions. The advantage of the approach, says Holsinger, is that "it provides inclusive settings for kids, a 'wrap-around' service, so that much of what the student needs is available in the same place. For children with autism—children who tend to thrive on consistency, predictability, and routine—this represents a significant benefit."

Holsinger, too, speaks of this collaborative approach as "the ideal way not only to deliver services to students but also to build confidence with parents. They see the schools as trying to provide the best supports for their child. And considering the complicated lives they live in having to figure out how to care for a child who has a syndrome that, by its very nature, realizes itself differently in almost everyone who has it, a collaborative approach makes their complicated life just a little easier." And everyone knows that there are times when "just a little easier" can make a big difference for everyone involved. ♦

Resource

For more detailed information about the programs discussed in this article, as well as other collaborative efforts in treating ASD, download *Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Best Practices in Inter-Organizational Collaboration* from www.dds.ca.gov/Autism/Home.cfm.

3. The Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) is a standardized assessment of a child's ability to communicate, interact, and play. It is designed specifically for individuals who have been referred for evaluation because of possible autism or an autistic spectrum disorder. See www.umaccweb.com/diagnostic_tools/index.html.

Innovative Focus on Student Learning

Butte County has six schools benefiting from RCAT-Plus focused monitoring grants provided by the California Department of Education (CDE). The overall purpose of focused monitoring is to support schools in improving student achievement. The particular focus of RCAT-Plus is to bring together teams of educators within each school to refocus instruction—from school-oriented results to student needs.

RCAT (Riverside County Achievement Teams) began at the Riverside County Office of Education as an effort to assess and restructure teaching. The CDE, through a contractual partnership agreement, named the project RCAT Plus (the “Plus” for a concerted focus on students with disabilities and on improving achievement). Now the project has expanded to help other school districts turn a clear eye to the one question that matters most to schools: are students learning? RCAT-Plus’s second central component—assessment—helps to provide answers to this question, as well as clarity about what steps a school needs to take to improve achievement.

In the RCAT-Plus methodology, schools reorganize instruction to address four questions: (1) What do we want our students to know and be able to do? (2) How will we know whether they’ve learned it? (3) What will we do if students don’t learn it? (4) What will we do if students do learn it?

Part of this reorganization involves school staff working in professional learning communities (PLCs), where grade-level or content-level teams come together to discuss and assess their curriculum. All processes are aligned with IDEA regulations and California’s State Performance Plan. Experienced staff members from the Riverside County

Office of Education provide the technical assistance and training for RCAT-Plus, and the effort is currently helping Butte develop the capacity to improve academic achievement for all students, including students with disabilities. According to Lora Gonzalez, Learning Program Specialist for Butte County SELPA (Special Education Local Plan Area), the PLCs are giving educators the chance to “become very clear on



what they need to accomplish.” In the PLCs, teachers look at content standards and develop guides for pacing instruction “so that students are given access to standards-aligned instruction.” PLCs also give their members a chance to talk through the processes of collaborating with peers, delivering instruction, assessing structure and, most importantly, focusing on student learning and achievement.

Patty Garrison, Instructional Resources Director and coordinator for the RCAT-Plus grant for Butte County, says that this process has turned the school’s attention to the right goals. She quotes Richard Elmore of Harvard University, who says, “The downfall of low-performing schools is not their lack of effort and motivation; rather it is poor decisions regarding what to work on.” Elmore goes on to say that the

challenge, therefore, is not just getting people to work; it is getting people to do the “right work.” “This grant has put a focus on the ‘right work,’” according to Garrison. “Yes, we need to work on student outcomes but also on the relationships we have with each other, what information is being shared and how it is shared, transparency, how to work together, and how to truly work at the school sites. We are addressing historical, fundamental educational practices.”

Superintendent of Schools Don McNeils says the timing was right for Butte County Office of Education to take advantage of RCAT-Plus. The opportunity it offered “fit very well with our mission and the activities we were already doing.” Some of the resources, such as a handbook called *Learning by Doing*, that are integral to the RCAT-Plus approach were already being used by Butte staff. So it was a fairly natural next step for these educators to join the RCAT-Plus effort. “The teams have used that book as their bible,” says Gonzalez. “Now they’re at a place where these ideas are starting to root and grow. They are understanding what they need to do, learning how to become a team and get the work done.” Garrison says that participating in RCAT-Plus has led to a deeper understanding of the fact that “we need to work together; and one person can’t take credit, since it’s a team effort.”

Every leadership team has a special education representative who plays a very important role. Gonzalez says that the teams have realized that special education teachers are intervention experts, the ones to go to whenever learning is not taking place. “Historically,” she says, “there’s been a division between special education and general

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education. There was no dialogue about how we influence each other. For the first time, this [RCAT-Plus] work has started to break down those walls of isolation. People are talking more about improving education for every child. Our special education teachers are feeling included, and our general education teachers are starting to understand more about addressing special needs. Collaborative practices are [helping us] serve every child.”

Although the leadership team feels it is too early to talk about improved test scores as a result of RCAT-Plus, team members have been invigorated by the process. And those working closely on the grant were pleased when school sites demonstrated their commitment to RCAT-Plus by being willing to pay some of the teachers’ stipends—and, of course, more than happy when the level of funding made that unnecessary.

Roy Applegate, Butte County SELPA Director, says that “this is the future of the kind of work necessary among educational leaders. For so many years in special education we have been preoccupied with compliance on laws and struggles with fiscal burdens. Focus on student achievement among students with disabilities will be a third critical priority.” Adds Gonzalez: “The conversation has changed at our county office, from how we’re doing our services to how what we’re doing affects students. That’s awesome.”

Superintendent McNeils says that RCAT-Plus focused monitoring will remain a priority in Butte County. “We’re all going to have to make difficult choices that will cause us to focus our priorities very clearly. Focused monitoring will be a priority, but it won’t be easy. We’re all going to have to do more with less money. But this is the right work—work that we ought to be doing.”

Garrison points out that once the methodology is shared, it can be used

by schools even when funding may limit participation in formal training programs. According to her, collaboration and communication do not cost anything, and the PLC structure has proven effective over and over again. “School leadership teams are research-based practices that show us how to share decision making [and] pull skills and expertise from all members of the team,” she says. “We are reorganizing the priorities of how we go about doing our work. Time spent on this is time well spent from the perspective of how we can collaborate [and] get clear on what we need to teach. That doesn’t cost money—it costs time, but it can turn into something that saves time.”

Garrison says that if the process ever feels “done” at the initial school sites, the teams have a plan to take what they have learned to other sites. “[RCAT-Plus] is reorganizing the way we approach our collective work,” says Gonzalez. “We’ve worked in isolation, and now we’re having conversations about how to meet the needs of every child.” With help from Riverside and the CDE, she says “we’re all speaking the same language, and now we’re representing every child.”

Roy Applegate thinks that President Obama’s stimulus package could be well used on projects like these. “Districts are going to receive one-time dollars, and this would be a wonderful use of that money.” ♦

Resources

Knowing the Right Thing to Do: School Improvement and Performance-Based Accountability. Richard F. Elmore (2003). Available as a free download at www.ecs.org/btml/Document.asp?chouseid=5066

Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work (book and CD-ROM). Richard Dufour et al., (2006). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

RCAT-Plus Scale-Up Project District and School Success Center, at www.rcoe.us/scaleup/index.html

commission to create the Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee. How exactly will these bills help to close the achievement gap?

Research conclusively shows the social and economic value of early education for children and families: children who attend good preschool programs are better prepared for kindergarten, have stronger language skills, and are less likely to repeat a grade or drop out of school than children who do not. In terms of closing the achievement gap, these benefits are especially evident for low-income children, English language learners, and children with disabilities.

But, according to researchers from the Rand Corporation, “the quality of preschools in California is mixed.” And in 2004 the National Institute for Early Education Research reported that California’s state-funded preschool programs met only four out of ten key benchmarks for quality (<http://nieer.org>).

So SB 1629 established a commission to propose a preschool quality improvement system that recommends the following: (1) an evaluation of current systems, (2) a quality rating scale for programs serving children from birth to five years of age, (3) a funding model aligned with the quality rating scale, and (4) strategies for how best to use government and private resources to improve the systems for child care and child development.

In turn, AB 2759 will consolidate, expand, and enhance the state’s existing preschool system (there are currently five different programs, all with different administrative requirements) to create the California State Preschool Program, the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation. This move will streamline the administration of these programs, improve their efficiency and effectiveness, and save money in administrative costs.

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Developing Partnerships

When families are involved in the schools their children attend, the children perform better in terms of “higher achievement, better attendance, more course credits earned, more responsible preparation for class, and other indicators of success in school,” according to research from the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. The NNPS also concludes that not just families make a difference. The organization states that “school, family, and community partnerships are essential for children’s success in school.”

Enter the P-16 Council’s third recommendation: Develop Partnerships to Close the Achievement Gap. The council has been working with the California Parent Information Resource Center Project, the CDE Title I Programs Office, the Family Area Network, and the Partnership Steering Committee on School Health Connections to make closing the achievement gap a “primary driver of their organizational efforts.”

One broadly useful tool this group is developing is the *Resource Kit for Partnerships to Close the Achievement Gap*, which will provide schools, families, businesses, and communities with the tools, processes, and resources they will need to work together to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates. According to Sallie Wilson, CDE consultant in the P-16 Policy Development Division, the resource kit “outlines elements that any new or existing partnership can use as a guide to develop a stronger alliance among school, business, family, and community stakeholders.” The kit consists of six sections, titled (1) Urgent Call to Action, (2) Data: An Essential Tool, (3) Start Where You Are: Identify Needs, Strengths, and Assets, (4) Making Connections, (5) How to Form Partnerships/Infrastructure, and (6) Sustainability/Evaluation. Each section includes rationales, resources, and success stories.

Superintendent O’Connell will formally announce the release of the kit this summer. At that time, it will be available as a free download at www.closingtheachievementgap.org on the CDE Web site under “Highlights.”

Sharing Successful Practices

In his State of Education Address in 2008, Superintendent O’Connell said, “For too long, school districts across the state have been left to solve problems on their own, with no central resource to guide them and no mechanism to collaborate with other educators across the state when success is achieved.” The P-16 Council’s twelfth recommendation—Share Successful Practices—is designed to change this. Called the Brokers of Expertise (BOE), this project is developing a system for providing California’s teachers with two things: an online environment where they can find instructional strategies, lesson plans, and resources to bring the California content standards to life in the classroom—essentially a “one-stop shop” of best practices for teaching; and a community of practice—a place for discussion forums where teachers can meet online, work collaboratively, learn from each other, and even become mentors. Ortega calls the effort “transformational. We have excellent content standards,” he says. “Now we are creating a system of how to apply the standards to instruction.”

Modeled after a similarly ambitious project in New York, NYLearns (www.nylearns.org), BOE is currently piloting an effort to identify the best practices in teaching Algebra I and fourth-grade English/Language Arts. The CDE has contracted this work through the California K-12 High Speed Network, which is working with other education technology programs, the state’s 58 county offices of education, and other entities to build upon the many existing, innovative approaches to using technology to help teachers and serve students.

“Everything is developing on schedule,” according to Teri Sanders, Director of K-12 Outreach in Technology

Services for Imperial County Office of Education, one of the county offices involved in the project. She speaks enthusiastically about the ways that BOE will allow educators “to collaborate, create, and improve resources together.”

One particularly promising aspect of the BOE for teachers of students with disabilities is its expressed goal to “improve teaching and learning by providing practitioners with easily attainable information that allows them to institute workable strategies for individual students and classes with unique needs and challenges.” Additional goals and more information about this effort can be found at www.k12hsn.org/boe.

A pivotal part of the work to develop the BOE involves teachers who are willing to test resources, provide feedback, and suggest promising and proven practices during this pilot phase. Educators interested in participating should contact Sanders at 760-312-6158 or at tsanders@k12hsn.org. The BOE environment will be available online by July 1, 2010.

Clearly, despite all of the recent, grim economic news, California’s P-16 Council has been able to continue its efforts to close the achievement gap for the state’s less-advantaged students. The council’s efforts are wide-ranging in their scope, vigorous in their approach, and innovative in their methodologies. Given the courage and foresight of the individuals involved in this effort—not to mention the potential benefit to all students—we can only be optimistic about the outcomes. ♦

Resources

The P-16 Council’s Web site:

www.cde.ca.gov/eol/inlpc

The California Action Team for Partnerships’ 2008–2009

Action Plan for Partnerships: Proposal to Deploy a Statewide Strategy for Parental and Community Involvement to Close the Achievement Gap and Increase Student Achievement, available at www.calpir.org/resources/partnerships.html

The Economics of Early Childhood Special Education

A

By Linda Brault, Director of *Beginning Together*, the *Teaching Pyramid*, and the *California Map to Inclusive Child Care Project*, WestEd Center for Child and Family Studies

s with so many educational concerns during these challenging economic times, early childhood programs are experiencing dramatic threats to their state and federal funding. However, there are some positive things happening, particularly in the amount of attention being paid to how we care for and educate young children.

But first, the bad news.

The budget reports out of Sacramento have been grim and are not getting any rosier. Early Intervention (EI) programs—those programs that provide services to very young children with special needs—have been asked to make 3.5 percent spending cuts across the board, with another 7 percent cut in the works. Most programs have very little overhead, so these shortfalls force difficult choices that leave early intervention administrators scratching their heads.

As a sign of the times, the Infant Development Association of California recently held a facilitated meeting titled “How to Cope in Stressful Times” in the San Fernando Valley. In addition, members of the Early Intervention Directors Forum of Los Angeles County have been meeting since 2008 to discuss similar issues. Shelley Cox, executive director for Step-by-Step, has been attending these events. As she sees it, those early intervention programs that are contracted with regional centers (“vended”) to provide necessary services are coping with budget-related concerns in a number of ways:

- By passing the cuts along to employees, often with the director assuming a greater percentage cut (for example, 4 percent for the director, 1.5 percent for employees)
- By restructuring their early interven-

tion programs, with some owner/directors absorbing certain tasks (by providing administrative and book-keeping support or increasing their delivery of direct services) and reducing their use of space and materials

- By fundraising to support areas not covered by “direct service” funding, such as parent groups, professional development, and multi-disciplinary meetings
- By charging fees to families for some additional services, such as parent-child play groups



Cox sees these coping strategies as presenting their own problems. Some agencies report that pay cuts are making it difficult to retain and attract highly qualified staff. In addition, the EI directors in Los Angeles are already seeing fewer children being identified for services and more children being simply “followed,” particularly children under age three. The fear is that the money is just not there to serve them, even though the children may be eligible for services.

Special education programs for children over age three are also suffering. There have been dramatic cuts in most school district programs, which have

impacted caseloads, service hours, and options for children. Most specifically, there continues to be a large demand for intensive services for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. At the same time, districts are being asked to examine costs in general, the specific costs for the transportation of children with individualized education programs (IEPs), and encroachment on general education funding. Preschool programs in the community and within districts are aware of the need to increase the enrollment of children in inclusive programs, but they are struggling to find the time and personnel to make this happen within their existing structures.

The list goes on. In general, no one seems to have the time or the money to maintain the high quality of services that everyone desires for young children.

But there is good news.

President Obama specifically mentioned early childhood programs in many of his postinaugural speeches. In general, there seems to be a renewed understanding in Washington that early childhood begins at birth, and early care and education for the youngest children is being supported in a number of ways.

For a start, there is the Obama-Biden “Zero to Five” plan that places “key emphasis at early care and education for infants, which is essential for children to be ready to enter kindergarten.” The plan will create Early Learning Challenge Grants to do the following:

- Expand Early Head Start and Head Start by quadrupling the Early Head Start program, increase Head Start funding, and improve quality for both.
- Increase access to “affordable and high-quality child care to ease the

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burden on working families.” (www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/education)

Information on these funds will be available at the www.whitehouse.gov Web site, as well as through such organizations as the California Head Start Association (www.cahtheadstart.org), National Head Start Association (www.nhsa.org), and Preschool California (www.preschoolcalifornia.org).

The budget submitted to Congress also recommends an increase in funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including specific increases in Part C (for infants and toddlers) and the preschool section 619 of Part B. In addition, there is money in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 for states under both Part B and Part C. Under the Part B recommendations, states may “expand the availability and range of inclusive placement options for preschoolers with disabilities by developing the capacity of public and private preschool programs to serve these children.” The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children will have information on these efforts (www.dec-sped.org).

At a more local level, several groups within California are working to bring together policymakers, advocates, and individuals who provide direct services to young children. The April 2, 2009, *Child Development Policy Institute (CDPI) Information Bulletin* highlighted a number of recent events that were designed to support early educators in these challenging times. The atmosphere of these events was described as full of “energy, hope, and enthusiasm” for three reasons: the research showing the importance of supporting very young children’s growth and development is stronger than ever; the people who hold the purse strings at both state and federal levels are beginning to understand the importance of designing programs that promote learning from birth; and more

people than ever are learning how to collaborate across systems and agencies.

How can this good news support us—early childhood special educators/early interventionists, family members, family support professionals, and administrators—as we cope with the bad news? We must take advantage of collaborative opportunities, build on existing efforts, and look for new possibilities.

One new possibility presents itself in the current expansion of Early Head Start/Head Start. Since many early childhood special education (ECSE)/EI programs already have good relationships with local Head Start providers, this may be a good time to reinforce relationships and expand partnerships. For example, ECSE/EI programs could offer a spare classroom to an agency

*“We must take advantage
of collaborative
opportunities”*

operating Head Start in exchange for enrolling children with disabilities (those with individualized family service plans [IFSPs] and individualized education programs [IEPs]). Some ECSE/EI program operators could choose to apply to operate an Early Head Start program as part of their array of services. And ECSE/EI staff could collaborate in professional development with the Early Head Start/Head Start programs by co-sponsoring training, providing training, or attending trainings.

As attention on early childhood translates into opportunities for programs and grants, school districts can bring together their ECSE leaders and other early childhood leaders to plan for services to *all* children within a district or Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA). For example, many school districts operate state-funded preschools or other general early childhood programs

in a department that does not include the ECSE/EI staff. Different administrators often oversee specialized services, such as programs for the deaf or hard of hearing, programs for the visually impaired or for related services (such as speech therapy), and adaptive physical education. If everyone who works with children under the age of five would come together, they could generate new ideas and create new collaborative opportunities through local funding (such as First 5) or federal grants.

School districts and local education agencies are being asked to dramatically increase the percentage of children with disabilities served in settings with typically developing children from 47.7 percent to 66 percent by 2010–2011. This creates another strong incentive for collaboration between general and special education, which also opens up the potential for increasing services in the least restrictive environments for preschool children with IEPs (California’s State Performance Plan Indicator #6).

The discussion about the importance of appropriate, high-quality care and education for children from birth through age five will continue during the current administration. As planning continues, early childhood professionals and family members can help to ensure that all children, including children with special needs, have access to high-quality, affordable child care.

First, there are a number of groups in California working to translate this recognition of importance into programs and services. Many of the professional associations, such as the Infant Development Association of California, the California Division for Early Education, the California Association for the Education of Young Children, and Head Start and preschool sites will be important catalysts and contacts in this effort.

Second, as leaders struggle to determine how to prioritize and fund various programs and activities, early childhood staff need to share their knowledge of

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Educators Find Ways to Face Financial Challenges

With budgets under attack and shrinking fast in many school districts, administrators and teachers are finding creative ways to stretch their dollars, while still providing the best possible education for all of their students.

For many districts, it amounts to some form of collaboration between special education and general education; in others, it involves seeking grants for special projects or bringing back to the district classes that traditionally have been outsourced at great cost. And in still others, it involves seamlessly integrating special and general education staff to maximize teachers' time with students. All of these efforts stress the importance of early intervention to help at-risk students in a general education setting so that fewer students will require the more intensive—and more costly—special education services.

Bringing Services Back Home

Any change to a student's special education program and services must be done through an IEP (individualized education program) team, and these changes require a number of things to be carefully balanced: the specific needs of the child, the district's budget, and legal compliance. Elk Grove Unified School District provides one effective example of this kind of balance. With

62,000 students, Elk Grove is the largest district in Northern California, and Director of Special Services Bill Tollestrup says the “district as a whole is greatly impacted by funding cuts.” Tollestrup has been working with IEP teams to find ways to economize without compromising quality. His immediate targets are the classes for students with severe disabilities, which have been contracted out to nonpublic-school agencies. This outsourcing “costs seven or eight times what we get to educate



those kids,” says Tollestrup. “Bringing kids back to the district is our biggest focus now.” To provide the services and the expertise required in these classes, Elk Grove is hiring occupational therapy, speech, and behavior specialists, and—in a diverse district with more than 80 languages represented—lan-

guage pathologists. Even with all of the new hires, the district will save considerable funds.

In the southern part of the state, the 25-school Hesperia Unified School District faces a \$7 million budget cut. It started a pilot autism program this year and is developing in-house classes for students with cognitive delays and emotional/behavioral issues. By not contracting out these costly services, says Margaret Snyder, Director of Special Services, the district will “cut the bill in half.” And Hesperia's neighbor, the Victor Elementary School District, is “bringing back” a class for students with emotional disturbances and establishing an autism special day class, according to Lori Clark, assistant superintendent of pupil services.

Pooling Resources

While there has been an increase in the number of programs that districts are starting to provide for themselves in the current economic downturn, not every district is large enough to offer such services on its own. So more creative thinking has resulted in other kinds of approaches to saving money. In Southern California the Desert Mountain SELPA (Special Education Local Plan Area) is pooling resources and providing regional services for the 15 school districts it serves. For example, this SELPA is using

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Preschools

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effective, evidence-based practice and the long-term impact of early intervention for children.

Then, when people wonder where tax dollars are being spent or how the stimulus money is being used, ECSE/EI staff should be able to provide examples of how these monies are supporting children with disabilities in our communities. ECSE/EI staff can also prepare

a very specific list of how new money could be spent, with a budget for each idea, so that when an opportunity presents itself, they are ready to act.

And finally, ECSE/EI staff can support leadership by keeping a long view. Those of us who have been in this profession for many years have seen the ebb and flow of money. This is not the first time finances have been tight, and it will not be the last. However, we know what is effective: early intervention is

effective, quality preschool is effective, collaboration among agencies is effective. We need to make sure this knowledge continues to inform decisions. While budget angst is real, it does not have to paralyze us. We can use it as an opportunity to become more creative.

Finally, regardless of how the money flows, we must stay determined in our efforts to support all young children. As we look ahead, we must remember that these children are our future. ♦

Medi-Cal dollars to fund a mental health clinic through the San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health. Thirty therapists serve 175 schools at no cost to the districts. That, says SELPA director Ron Powell, “is thinking way outside the box.”

Finding New Funding Sources

Back in Elk Grove, Tollestrup was “looking for funding sources outside the regular streams.” The district applied for—and was awarded—a \$3 million federal Reading First grant to improve reading outcomes for special education students. Elk Grove used the funds to hire literacy coaches who work with special education staff on literacy curriculum, continuing Elk Grove’s decades-long work in blurring the boundaries between special and general education.

At the district’s Arlene Hein Elementary School, resource specialist Carolyn Cook-Flores says “having a coach with us has been so valuable. Every teacher needs to go back and learn new, research-based strategies.” Coaching, she says, “gave me an arsenal of tools.” To keep the arsenal stocked, the district will “aggressively go after ways to continue the grant,” Tollestrup says.

Collaborating

While a collaborative service delivery model “is not a quick fix for budget problems,” says Sheri Wilkins, Program Manager at Desert Mountain SELPA, she says that it does make sharing resources of all kinds more possible. One important resource that schools are finding creative ways to share is personnel.

When the entire school staff works together to identify at-risk students early and meet their needs in a general education setting, fewer students will “end up in special education,” says Denise Edge, principal of Lomitas Elementary School in the Victor district. “The lower the case loads for special education staff, the more opportunity they have to work in a coaching relationship with general education teachers.”

Meeting the state requirement of one special education teacher for every 28 students with IEPs still leaves room for flexibility in funding staff, says Elk Grove’s Tollestrup. “If a school needs a reading specialist, we can use special education funding for that as long as we meet the caseload requirement. We can blend funds to serve kids based on the needs of the schools.” This blurring of boundaries and collaborating between general education and special education allows schools to provide intensive, focused services to students in general education, with the belief that this kind of early intervention actually prevents a student from ever needing an IEP.

Cindy Toews, Director of Pupil Services in the Sanger Unified School District, says that collaboration ultimately saves money; it allows a school to meld resources in a school-wide approach to staffing and teacher training at a time when “everyone is going to have budget cuts.”

Growing Your Own

In another cost-cutting measure, the Sanger Unified School District did not hire program managers this year. “Instead, we gave support to staff at the school site,” says Toews. “Initially, principals learned about special education programs and received training on compliance issues.” In that way, she says, “schools become owners of their own programs,” and the district saves valuable funds.

At Arlene Hein Elementary, a K–6 school with 950 students, there are eight paraeducators (individuals who are trained to work with special education students but who are not certified as teachers) and one open position that is not being filled. “Using the paras creatively is a big logistics game,” says Cook-Flores. Assigned to individual students in a general education class setting, they are not always needed in that classroom. “Then we can swing that [paraeducator] to another classroom, or to help the speech pathologist, or to assist in the learning center,” a large open

room with small instructional areas that has replaced special day classes at many schools and serves students who need extra instruction, whether or not they have IEPs.

The learning center model provides additional savings for some schools, as it frees up classroom space for other uses. And space is a valuable resource in schools with increasing enrollments. Bill Tollestrup remembers being a teacher at a time when each of the six special education classes at his school had a separate classroom. “We said ‘we’ll give back the six rooms; we need two large rooms with small, instructional areas.’” The model proved so successful that older schools in the Elk Grove district were remodeled to include learning centers, and newer schools were built to include these centers from the start.

Using Technology

Technology is helping some schools work more efficiently, as well. In the Sanger district, a teacher is developing an adult transition program for seniors who don’t receive diplomas. The program, created in collaboration with California State University at Fresno, will be available online next year. And at Arlene Hein, a collaborative effort between grade-level teachers and district math coaches resulted in an online program for teaching math. “Now when a student is not at grade level and needs help,” says Cook-Flores, “the teacher can get on the computer, find the unit they are teaching, and see how their colleagues broke it down.”

In these and other ways, schools and school districts across the state are looking to cut costs and manage resources more effectively. In the end, however, even in times of budget constraints, “it’s not about what money you can save through collaboration or how much money you are draining away from general education,” says Desert Mountain SELPA’s Ron Powell. “It’s about creating general education settings that provide services to all students, no matter what their needs.” ♦ —Janet Mandelstam

New RiSE Books

Disability Awareness—Do It Right!

Mary Johnson, Ed. 2006. This book offers tips, techniques, and handouts for conducting a successful disability awareness day. Call #24004.

Disability Is Natural: Revolutionary Common Sense for Raising Successful Children with Disabilities

Kathie Snow. 2005. Focusing on disability as a natural part of the human experience, this positive manual offers ways to define a child by his or her assets, instead of by a disability-related “problem.” The book is full of strategies for helping children with disabilities realize their goals and dreams. Call #24005.

Engaging Autism: Using the Floortime Approach to Help Children Relate, Communicate, and Think

Stanley I. Greenspan and Serena Wieder. 2009. This book provides a developmental intervention approach to autism and ASD (autism spectrum disorders) and focuses on overcoming the underlying deficits of the disorder. Call #23997.

Quality Enhancement in Developmental Disabilities

Valerie J. Bradley and Madeleine H. Kimmich. 2003. This guide shows professionals in the human services field how to individually tailor supports for individuals with developmental disabilities, as well as how to enhance the quality of services they provide so that these individuals can determine their own futures. Call #24002.

The Sixth Sense II

Carol Gray. 2002. This lesson plan promotes understanding and supportive social climates for children with autism spectrum disorders. Call #24003.

Transition Assessment:

Wise Practices for Quality Lives

Karen L. Sax and Colleen A. Toma. 2002. This sensitive and practical guidebook places assessment at the heart of transition planning and shows readers the importance of understanding the needs and goals of young people with disabilities before planning supports to guide them into adult life. Call #23998.

The RiSE (Resources in Special Education) Library freely lends materials to California residents; the borrower only pays for return postage. The items listed on this page are a small sample of what the library offers. Go to www.pbp.com/services/libraries to view all holdings. To order materials, either phone or e-mail RiSE librarian Judy Bower: 408-727-5775; judy.bower@pbp.com.

Transition to Adulthood: A Resource for Assisting Young People with Emotional or Behavioral Difficulties

Hewitt B. Clark and Maryann Davis. 2000. This book offers interventions for handling the key issues that face young adults in transition. Call #23995.

New RiSE Video

Teaching Independence and Choice: How to Use Photographic and Written Activity Schedules in Autism Intervention (2 DVDs)

Princeton Child Development Institute. This video demonstrates the use of Applied Behavior Analysis, shows curriculum materials, and illustrates error-correction and prompt-fading procedures for children with autism. Call #24008.

Disability Awareness

Children—both those with disabilities and those without—form their attitudes about disability at a very young age. Something as simple as reading a book that presents the facts about disabilities with acceptance and respect can make a powerful difference in helping to shape healthy attitudes for a lifetime. The following stories can help do just that, and all can be borrowed from the RiSE Library. (Parents may also find the list useful for “Adopt a Book” programs at their schools.)

Children’s Books

Don’t Call Me Special:

A First Look at Disability

Pat Thomas. 2002. Call #23999.

I Just Am: A Story of Down Syndrome Awareness and Tolerance

Bryan and Tom Lambke. 2006. Call #23994.

In Jesse’s Shoes: Appreciating Kids with Special Needs

Beverly Lewis. 2007. Call #23996.

Just Kids

Ellen Senisi. 1998. Call #0301.

Let’s Talk About It:

Extraordinary Friends

Fred Rogers. 2000. Call #24000.

Rainbow of Friends

P.K. Hallinan. 2006. Call #24001.

Somebody Called Me a Retard

Today . . . and My Heart Felt Sad
Ellen O’Shaughnessy. 1992.
Call #0301.

There’s a Blue Square on My Brother’s School Bus

Sally Craymer. 2008. Call #0301.

Videos with Activities

Intricate Minds III: Understanding Elementary Schools Classmates

Who Think Differently

Matt Coulter. 2005. Call #24006.

Kids Belong Together

People First. Call #1200.

Kids with Differences

Arnold Creek Productions. Call #24007.

With a Little Help from My Friends

Marsha Forest. Call #1205.

Without Pity

Christopher Reeves. 1996. Call #0301.

Web Resources

Autism

www.necc.org/autism_resources

The New England's Center for Children's Autism, founded in 1975, provides state-of-the-art autism education and treatment for children with autism spectrum disorder, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), and Asperger's syndrome. The center offers a full array of Web-based resources for parents and educators.

www.pcdi.org/resources/newsletter.asp

The newsletter of the Princeton Child Development Institute, *PCDI Report*, focuses on autism research and intervention; it is available online and free of charge at the above URL.

Budgets

www.cde.ca.gov/nr/rel/bt/bcrc.asp

The California Department of Education offers online information to the education community about the federal economic stimulus package (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009), the proposed state budget cuts, and their effect on education in California.

Closing the Achievement Gap

www2.edc.org/ndpc-sd/cognitive/report.pdf

The Effects of Cognitive Behavioral Interventions on Dropout for Youth with Disabilities is a report that explores how cognitive-behavioral interventions/therapies affect dropout rates and violent aggression in secondary-aged youth with disabilities. While almost twice as many students with disabilities drop out of school as students without disabilities, the very highest dropout rates are found among students with emotional or behavioral disorders.

<http://centeroninstruction.org/>

The Center on Instruction makes available online information about NCLB and best practices in reading, math, science, special education, and English language instruction; syntheses

of recent scientific research on instruction; opportunities for professional development; and free webinars.

<http://tinyurl.com/csbr8c>

"The Challenge of Assessing School Climate" outlines ways for educators to assess their school's climate in terms of safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment.

www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smul/print/btdocs/smu/webinars.htm

Schools Moving Up offers online resources that are designed to help schools and school districts raise student achievement.

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wucl/publications/practiceguides>

The U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences together offer practical guides for educators to help them address everyday classroom challenges. Numerous guides are available, all as free downloads at the above URL.

Collaboration

www.parrotpublishing.com

Collaborative Teaching: Special Education for Inclusive Classrooms is a book available in its entirety as a free download at the above URL. This comprehensive document addresses a wide range of issues related to the challenge of blending general education and special education efforts, including those related to legal questions, parental concerns, strategies and programming at both elementary and secondary levels, accommodations, and more.

Inclusion

<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kmcl9610.htm>

Responses to Questions Teachers and Administrators Frequently Ask About Inclusive School Programs is written to help professionals who are beginning to grapple with the meaning of inclusive school programs and with what exactly is involved in making a school more inclusive.

Independence

www.youtube.com

Enter "CAC leadership board resource center" in the "search" space on YouTube, and you will find dozens of excellent, free videos from the Board Resource Center about supporting the independence of individuals with diverse disabilities.

Partnerships

www.csos.jbu.edu/P2000/center.htm

The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University supports parental involvement, family engagement, and community partnerships. NNPS resources are designed for all schools to increase involvement and improve student learning and for district leaders who want to develop goal-oriented programs for family involvement and community connections—and to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements for parent involvement.

<http://cfs.fmbi.usf.edu/Policy/RMRT/PDF/1Pasco-family.pdf>

Creating Environments that Work for All Students: Increasing Family Involvement for Special Populations is a free, downloadable PDF created to help teachers in special education improve the involvement of families.

Preschool

www.CAinclusiveChildCare.org/camap

The California Map to Inclusive Child Care Web site provides a wealth of information on inclusive practices for preschools, along with numerous resources in support of inclusion.

www.idaofcal.org

The Infant Development Association of California unites parents and professionals who are committed to ensuring optimal developmental outcomes for infants with special needs and their families. The organization's Web site offers information and a large collection of resources in support of this mission.

2009 Calendar

July 31–August 2 National Down Syndrome Congress

The National Down Syndrome Congress Convention is a gathering of self-advocates, family members, and professionals associated with Down syndrome. The purpose of the event is to promote the availability of and accessibility to a full range of opportunities and resources for individuals with Down syndrome, build a sense of community for all people concerned with Down syndrome, and much more. Sacramento, CA. For more information, phone 800-232-6372 or e-mail info@ndscenter.org; or go to www.ndscenter.org/news/events.php.

August 18 CHADD Conference

This conference, sponsored by CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—AD/HD), is designed for educators, parents, psychologists, social workers, and health-care professionals and will offer research-based information and promising practices about AD/HD. Anaheim, CA. For more information, contact Marsha Bokman at 800-233-4050, ext. 118; or Conference@cbadd.org. Or go to www.cbadd.org/Content/CHADD/Conferences_Training/Future_Conferences/default.htm.

September 30–October 2 The ABCs of School Failure: Absenteeism, Bullying, Climate

This conference, sponsored by the California Supervisors of Child Welfare and Attendance, will examine the impact of truancy and bullying on school climate. The event is designed for teachers, educators, parents, and all professionals dedicated to improving school climate and safety and to increasing school attendance. Palm Springs, CA. For more information, contact Jerry Hime at 714-390-2679 or gjbime@earthblink.net; or go to www.cascwa.org.

November 5–8 CBEA Conference: Rigor, Relevance, and Rejuvenation

Sponsored by the California Business Education Association, this conference is designed to link education and industry by providing relevant learning experiences to educators and individuals in business in an effort to develop and strengthen workplace competencies in all students. Riverside, CA. For more information, contact Susie White at 925-377-0939 or cbeaquestions@cbeaonline.org; or go to www.cbeaonline.org.

November 16–18 Ready To Learn: Helping At-Risk Students Survive and Thrive

Sponsored by the EduAlliance Network, this conference is for all educators who work with students who are at risk of dropping out. The purpose of the event is to provide the tools and strategies educators need to help all students thrive academically and graduate. Hollywood, CA. For more information, phone 831-425-0299 or e-mail admin@edualliance.org; or go to www.edualliance.org/2009/RTL.

December 2–3 Secondary Literacy Summit IX Best Practices for School-Wide Literacy, Systems, and Strategies

Sponsored by the California Department of Education, this summit is designed for teachers, administrators, and reading specialists and will highlight best practices for creating literacy benchmarks, using strategic and intensive interventions, developing content-area literacy, and closing the achievement gap for English learners and students with special needs. Costa Mesa, CA. For more information, contact Geri Mohler at gmohler@cde.ca.gov or 916-322-6638; or go to www.cacompcenter.org/cslcaccl/print/btdocs/caccl/secondaryliteracy.htm.

And be sure to check . . .

SchoolsMovingUp webinars, which bring experts to the Web to share new ideas, offer relevant resources, and interact with participants. Find the most current calendar for these events at www.schoolsmovingup.net/cslsmul/print/btdocs/smulwebinars.htm.

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Indomitable Eric Dearden: An Update

“W

*e are made to persist.
That's how we find
out who we are.”
—Tobias Wolf*

Readers of this publication may remember an article that appeared in this very space one year ago. It was about Eric Dearden, a young man with autism who had worked hard to pass the classes he needed to graduate from high school—but he could not pass the English portion of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

Eric was described as “intrepid” and “indomitable” in that earlier piece, and he has proven true to that description. He attended all of his senior year activities, walked in the commencement ceremony with his class, and then won a Principal’s Award scholarship to Pasadena City College.

But he still could not pass the exit exam and did not have his diploma.

So last summer he enrolled in a CAHSEE summer school class and then returned to Marshall High School part time in the fall to take another class to develop the English skills he needed for the exam; he also enrolled in a class in general study skills. On top of this, he began private tutoring at the Huntington Learning Center. In November 2008, Eric took the CAHSEE English test for the eighth time. He did not pass. In fact, his score went down.

But true to form, Eric only ratcheted up his tutoring sessions to three times a week at Huntington, and in February 2009 he took the English portion of the CAHSEE for the ninth time. Because he would not learn the

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*New high school diploma recipient
Eric Dearden*

results of the February test until late the next month, Eric also took the CAHSEE for the tenth time in mid-March.

Shortly thereafter, Eric’s case carrier and study skills teacher from high school, Christy Ware, personally phoned Peggy Dearden, Eric’s mother, to tell her the great news: Eric had passed his February English CAHSEE test with a score of 371.

Now with that exam behind him and his future ahead, Eric plans to take the summer off from school and from studies—something he has not done since pre-kindergarten. Next fall, he plans to enroll at Pasadena City College and study to become either a personal care assistant or a dentist’s assistant.

At the moment, though, Eric is busily planning to attend Marshall’s senior prom for the second time—as the guest of his girlfriend. And he is excited that he will have his braces removed just in time for that event.

Congratulations on all counts, Eric. Intrepid indeed! ♦