The Special EDge

Informing and supporting parents, educators, service providers, and policymakers on topics related to special education

It Takes a Village

School-Community Collaboration

Schools are being asked to do increasingly more for children than simply educate them—from feeding them to teaching them good manners and social skills. How might schools better partner with families and communities so that raising children truly becomes a "whole-village" effort?

Mavis G. Sanders, PhD, Professor and Associate Chair of Education, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Last year, about one out of six students with disabilities dropped out of California's high schools—compared with the state average of one in nine. About one in seven students with disabilities and one in three African American males with disabilities received an out-of-school suspension compared with about one in sixteen students without disabilities.[1] In general, educational outcomes for students with disabilities in California mirror those across the nation. On one hand, they represent a picture of significant gains. On the other, they represent an urgent need for further progress. Developing school, family, and community partnerships is one important strategy for ensuring this progress.

School, Family, and Community Partnerships

School, family, and community partnerships refer to the relationships between and among key adults in the lives of children and youth. The term has gained increasing popularity among educators because it captures the collaborative context in which children's cognitive and socio-emotional development takes place. Schools alone cannot meet the multifaceted learning needs of all students. The human, material, and psychological supports that can only come out of students' families and communities are also required to ensure that children and youth, regardless of background, have equal opportunities to learn and achieve to their full potential.

Inside

Note

1. Data compiled from several sources: *Annual Compendium of Disability Statistics*, **http://disabilitycompendium.org/compendium-statistics/special-education**. California Department of Education, "State Schools Chief Tom Torlakson Releases First Detailed Data on Student Suspension and Expulsion Rates," **http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr13/yr13rel48.asp**. California Department of Education, "State Schools Chief Tom Torlakson Announces High School Graduation Rate Tops 80 Percent," **http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr14/yr14rel42.asp**. Kimetha Hill, "Suspension Rate for African American Students in California Alarming," *Voice and Viewpoint*, **http://sdvoice.info/suspension-rate-for-african-american-students-in-california-alarming/**.

The Special EDge

Letter from State Director Fred Balcom

Attitudes of "us and them" have changed to "we're all in this together."

A report this year from the California Comprehensive Center shows that, in some schools in California, students with disabilities are realizing unprecedented success. One of the key contributors to this success is the collaborative culture in which these students learn. Within their schools, general education typically does not happen in one classroom and special education in another—in fact, the lines between these two "educations" are fundamentally blurred; attitudes of "us and them" have changed to "we're all in this together"; and resources—money as well as talent, attention, time, and commitment—are pooled to the greatest degree possible so that there is simply effective education for every student.

A recent and highly lauded approach to restructuring schools, the multitiered system of supports (MTSS), reflects this growing understanding that collaborative systems are efficient and effective. Central to these efforts is the shared belief that early intervention—focused instruction, services, and supports that are provided as soon as any child starts struggling in either academics or behavior—is critical and effective in preventing learning challenges from becoming learning disabilities. Since learning disabilities represent the largest category of disability in the state, prevention translates into significant gains—both academic and financial—for schools.

Collaboration also seems to be at the heart of other changes in the state's educational landscape. California's new funding mechanism for education—the Local Control Funding Formula—reinforces collaborative efforts as it abolishes many rigid funding categories, making it possible for local districts to blend state monies and more efficiently address the needs of their students. While the LCFF does not direct the use of special education dollars, it holds districts accountable for the school success of students with disabilities—and thus provides significant incentive to leverage human as well as financial capital for the school success of all.

Of course creating a collaborative culture by implementing a multitiered system of supports, blending funding, and coordinating individual efforts all require strong leadership from individuals at every level—administrators, principals, teachers, and service providers who are willing to develop relationships, take risks, and generally challenge themselves to be lifelong learners. In short, to model the behaviors and dispositions we want our students to embrace—and that will serve them for a lifetime.

This issue of *The Special EDge* explores what collaboration looks like at several levels—within communities, for school leaders, among educators, with parents, and with the students themselves—and suggests strategies, approaches, and necessary attitudes for creating collaborative school cultures where "everyone is in it together" and all students succeed.

—Fred Balcom

Creating Effective Systems
School Leadership and Collaboration

"How can school leaders create collaborative systems?" may be the wrong question. Effective systems are, by nature, collaborative. So perhaps the better question to ask is, "How do you create an effective system?"

Some of California's most successful school leaders start their answers in a variety of ways:

"Create a vision,"
        says Steve Winlock.
"Do what you believe,"
        says Bill Tollestrup.
"Place others before self,"
        says Ron Powell.
"Be present,"
        says Judy Holsinger.
"Check your ego at the door,"
        says Troy Knudsvig.

Their extended answers are somewhat surprising—and consistent. None of them cites a list of programs to implement. Not one of them talks theory. And no one uses educational jargon. What they all do is talk about leadership in terms of some of the most basic principles of human relationships.

Have a Vision

Steven Winlock is executive director of the Sacramento County Office of Education Leadership Institute and a governor's appointee on the California Advisory Commission on Special Education. In his previous position as associate superintendent of education for the Elk Grove Unified School District, Winlock "was responsible for 39 elementary schools . . . more than 32,000 students and an operating budget of over $60 million." Under his watch, the district saw "significant academic achievement . . . 25 elementary schools with an Academic Performance Index (API) over 800 and no Title I schools with an API under 700. Prior to his tenure, Elk Grove had only one school with an API over 800."[1]

Winlock attributes his effectiveness as a leader to his focus on always having a vision. As confirmation of that importance, he points to the California Professional Standards for Educational Leadership,[2] the first of which calls on school leaders to create "a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" and to "facilitate the development of a shared vision for the achievement of all students."

According to Winlock, "your vision defines your mission." But, he cautions, both vision and mission can only grow out of accurate information. "Know your kids and your community," he says. "Understand the people you're working with. What are the issues? From there you can develop a vision of where you want to go and translate your vision into action steps. If no one is collaborating, then that's your issue."

Bill Tollestrup, director of student services for the Elk Grove Unified School District, agrees. Tollestrup was instrumental in providing struggling students in his district with early intervention services and breaking cycles of school failure. He attributes his professional success—and the success of Elk Grove in improving test scores for all students and reducing its numbers of students with learning disabilities—to a focus on relationships.

Believe

Tollestrup points to the etymology of the word "collaboration" as an important directive for school leaders. "The root of the word is 'labor,'" he says, "with the prefix meaning 'coming together.' We have to come together to do the work—that's the only way to get it done." That coming together must, in his opinion, be informed by a shared "why,"[3] which serves to connect people to their original purpose for becoming educators. "Why are we all doing this? Even disagreements with unions must be grounded in an understanding of the shared goal."

It's not effective, he says, to "start with a problem and then decide on a fix. We first must look at what we believe and want to make happen. Teaching and administering has its daily grind, and it's very easy to get taken up with all of the distractions. So we must constantly go

back to why we got into this work in the first place—it's to make a difference in the lives of all of these young people."

Tollestrup wears his idealism proudly. He likes to talk about "big, hairy, audacious goals."[4] People become educators, he says, "because they want to change the world. And educating kids *can* change the world." However, only by building "a culture of trust—by building relationships—only then do we get people to buy into the belief."

Tollestrup gives as an example a dilemma he is facing about a new curriculum. District data make clear the need for this curriculum. And he knows he has found the best one available. But he also knows that "if my people don't believe in the importance of this new curriculum, they will view it as just one more thing they have to do." It's his job, he says, to listen to them, to talk to them, to make sure their beliefs align—and to make sure they see the curriculum as a way to live their beliefs. "We do what we really believe," he says.

Ron Powell, administrator of Desert Mountain SELPA, agrees that common belief is central to relationships—and to effective leadership. "We would like to believe that as leaders we are rational actors who make logical decisions based upon immediate circumstances," he says, "But as a doctoral student, I studied the factors that drive principals' behavior and discovered that idiosyncratic beliefs about individuals and organizations will trump environmental influence every time."

Powell has experienced an interesting problem as a leader in his field. Many educators don't see his example as one they can follow, in great part because

of Powell's tremendous success. He has introduced throughout the 24 school districts that are part of his SELPA an unprecedented number of programs, reforms, and coordinated services, including the Desert/Mountain Children's Center, a community-based mental health clinic that serves more than 8,000 children annually. A recipient of numerous awards, most recently the Lifetime Advocate award for "outstanding dedication and tireless efforts on behalf of at-risk children in our communities,"[5] Powell may agree that

his successes are not exactly replicable; creative solutions to tough problems rarely look the same from one place to another. However, he says that if people were to follow what he calls "a few fundamentals," they "will be guaranteed their own version of excellence."

Powell says that he practices "value-centered leadership," which he describes as "outward oriented" and involves placing "others before self." This concept, he says, is best captured in a quotation by General George C. Marshall who stated: "There is no limit to the good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit."

Find Purpose

Powell also insists on "the importance of purposeful work." The motto he has chosen for himself and his colleagues is "The Relentless Pursuit of Whatever Works in the Life of a Child." He makes it clear that he knows of no greater purpose than improving the lives of children, and he has seen people become effective leaders when they "inspire others through their own passion and example to become their better selves. It's not about establishing rules or perks."

Keep It Simple

Powell attributes his clarity of vision as a leader to the principles of Margaret Wheatley: the "importance of identity, relationship, and information" in everything he does.[6] Clearly a tough-minded student of leadership theory, Powell insists on "keeping it simple" in the principles he adopts. He understands Michael Fullan[7] to be saying the same things that Wheatley says when Fullan talks about "the importance of mobilizing moral purpose, quality of relationship, quality of knowledge."

After distilling numerous theories on leadership, Powell has come up with "very few rules. But we align people behind common values within a social environment that is characterized by trust and respect." With those rules and values in place, he says, "people consent to be led to accomplish a purpose that is bigger than themselves."

Powell also counsels aspiring school leaders to have "a tolerance for ambiguity. You don't need things pinned down. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. It's about adjusting things as you go along.

"I never actually planned for tomorrow," he says. "Instead, I take each day, a step at a time." Here he likes to reference "a poem my mom would recite to me that has stayed with me: 'In doing,

each day that goes by, Some little good—not in dreaming Of great things to do by and by.'[8] That's my recipe for doing this work; making things a little better each day."

His level of commitment and idealism may be rare; but they are certainly effective. "People come to work here and they don't leave," he says. "We have more than 100 applicants for every job opening."

Be Present

Judith Holsinger, executive director of the Sacramento County SELPA, has also received numerous awards for her leadership, the most recent being the Outstanding Woman Leader of the Year from the Association of California School Administrators. When recruited to teach a course titled "Ethics in Special Education" at a leadership institute, Holsinger organized her instruction around three tenets for school leaders: "be authentic; be present; be responsible."

"Be part of what you're asking teachers to do," she advises. "If you expect to develop a collaborative culture, then have an open door." She insists that school administrators at every level have to "be this huge, giant model for what you want others to do. Don't skimp. To bring a change in culture you have to model the change."

In her opinion, "too many administrators forget that the most important place for them to be is in their schools with their doors open to their staff and teachers. You learn the most when you're with these people and having conversations, whether they're spontaneous or planned. E-mail has its place, but I would rather walk downstairs and over to another building to talk with someone in person. I want to make sure that every person knows that they are important. I want people to feel valued. As a leader, it's my job to care, to be there, and to provide whatever support and help I can. It's about my presence, and it's about *how* I am present."

Recognize Talent

To be a successful school leader, "care about people," echoes Troy Knudsvig, director of special education for the Val Verde Unified School District. Val Verde is known for its improbable success. Despite challenging demographics, in particular its "above-state-average student poverty" and above-average numbers of English language learners,[9] Val Verde boasts an improvement of 189 points in its Academic Performance Index (API) from 2003 to 2013, along with the fourth highest graduation rate and one of the highest school attendance rates in Riverside County.

Knudsvig says that his advice to school leaders to "'check your ego at the door' has helped our district's leaders to recognize people's strengths and tap into those. I value all the expertise in my school. I know I am not more valuable that anyone else." He is on a mission to continually "find the talent, share it, and show it. We work hard to coach people so they are prepared and knowledgeable."

> *As a leader, it's my job to care, to be there, and to provide whatever support and help I can. It's about my presence, and it's about how I am present."*

Notes & Resources

1. *Elk Grove Citizen*. (2009). "Dr. Winlock Retires from EGUSD." http://www.egcitizen.com/articles/2009/08/26/news/doc4a8de506bb5cc281758159.txt
2. The California Professional Standards for Leadership are at http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/cpsel_standards.pdf
3. Simon Sinek explains the shared "why" at http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en#
4. "Big hairy audacious goals" is a phrased coined by James Collins and Jerry Porras in their 1994 book, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. New York: HarperCollins.
5. County of San Bernardino Children's Network. (2014). The 16th Annual "Shine a Light on Child Abuse" Awards Breakfast. http://hs.sbcounty.gov/CN/Pages/AwardsBreakfast.aspx
6. Read an interview with Margaret Wheately at http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/wheatley.html
7. Fullan, M., Cuttress, C., & Kilcher, A. (2005). *8 Forces for Leaders of Change*. Leadership. National Staff Development Council. http://www.michaelfullan.ca/media/13396067650.pdf
8. Alice Cary's poem, "Nobility," can be found at http://www.everyday-wisdom.com/poem-nobility.html
9. Huberman, M., & Parrish, T. (2011). *Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education*. California Comprehensive Center. http://www.calstat.org/ISES/pdf/lessons_from_ca_districts_strong_spec_ed_academic_performance.pdf

▶ **A Climate for Academic Success: How School Climate Distinguishes Schools That Are Beating the Achievement Odds.** (2013). California Comprehensive Center. http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/hd-13-01.pdf

▶ **How Leadership Influences School Learning.** The Wallace Foundation. http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/Pages/default.aspx

▶ **School Leaders Matter.** Education Next. http://educationnext.org/school-leaders-matter/

The increased presence of school, family, and community collaboration in education policy and reforms is based on more than three decades of research showing its positive effects on students' learning and behavior. Summarizing the overall findings of this research, Henderson and Mapp concluded, "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing. . . . When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more."[2] Despite convincing conclusions about the importance of these kinds of partnerships for student learning, there remains room for much improvement in the practice, particularly in the way schools collaborate to support students with disabilities.

Why Partnerships Are Important for Students with Disabilities

Since the initial passage and reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), educational opportunities for children and adolescents with disabilities have dramatically improved. In addition to their families having greater voice in educational decision making, students with disabilities have greater access to needed services and are schooled in less restrictive learning environments. Yet, here too more progress is needed. Nearly 13 percent of the nation's K–12 students have identified disabilities. These students are disproportionately culturally and linguistically diverse.

They are also less likely to complete high school and to experience successful secondary transitions than students without disabilities. School, family, and community collaboration is one strategy to address these inequities and to improve educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Partnerships and Disproportionality

Disproportionality is a complex and longstanding issue in the field of special education. It refers to the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of specific culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups in special education programs relative to their representation in the overall student population. Of particular concern is the disproportionate representation of CLD students in such high-incidence special education categories as mild intellectual disability, learning disability, and emotional disturbance. These programs have been described by Janette Klingner and colleagues as "judgmental" categories because, unlike such low-incidence disability categories as visual or auditory impairment, school clinicians exercise

"wide latitude" in student identification.[3] African American students are more likely than White, Latino, or Asian students to be placed in programs for these high-incidence disabilities and in more segregated and restrictive learning environments. On the other hand, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Latinos are often underrepresented in special education. Both situations are undesirable. Either identifying students as disabled when they are not or failing to adequately identify and respond to disabilities when they exist has negative consequences for students' learning and development.

School, family, and community collaboration can assist in reducing disproportionality by providing school personnel with greater insights into students' cognitive, cultural, and socio-emotional strengths as well as needs. Prior to referring a student for special education services, school personnel, family members, and community partners (e.g., tutors, mentors, coaches), as applicable, should meet to discuss the child's behavior in these different contexts as well as events or situations that could be affecting his or her school performance. Emphasizing the importance of such collaboration, Festus Obiakor describes an instance in which a teacher misinterpreted a student's sudden anger, resentment, and rebelliousness in class as "emotional disturbance" when in fact his change in demeanor was a reaction to his parents' contentious divorce.[4] Through communication with key stakeholders, school personnel can avoid such errors, develop a more comprehensive and accurate view of the child, and better respond to his or her learning needs.

Partnerships and High School Completion

More students with disabilities are completing high school than ever before. However, the dropout rate for these students remains approximately double that of students in the general education population. While a variety of factors influence when, how, and whether a student will complete high school, family and community engagement has been identified as an effective strategy to reduce dropout rates among high-risk students. Mentoring programs such as Check and Connect[5] have proven especially effective for students with disabilities at risk of dropping out of school. Central to the success of Check and Connect is the relationship this program promotes between the student and a caring, trained mentor who advocates for and challenges the student to remain focused on education and school completion. Mentors monitor students' attendance, participate in school activities, and—most importantly—conduct family outreach.

When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.

Research reported by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition emphasizes the important role that families play in facilitating students' high school completion. For example, family engagement, specifically monitoring and providing assistance with homework as well as guiding and reasonably restricting out-of-school-time behaviors, is associated with lower dropout rates for African American males with disabilities. While some parents will carry out these and other engagement practices without guidance and support from school personnel, many will not because they lack information, confidence, or the belief that they can make a difference in their adolescents' educational outcomes. By providing practical, research-based information to families of students with disabilities and by connecting those at risk of dropping out with qualified and supportive mentors in their communities, high schools can help to ensure that students with—as well as without—disabilities graduate.

Partnerships and Post-Secondary Transitions

The transition from high school into young adulthood is a critical and anxious period in the lives of most adolescents. For adolescents with disabilities, however, even more thought and preparation is required for successful transition. Recognizing this need, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA requires that the first Individualized Education Program (IEP) that will be in effect when a student turns 16 includes a statement of the student's transition needs. The law further requires that subsequent IEP meetings include specific transitional planning and goal setting. School, family, and community collaboration is an essential element of this process.

Together, schools, families, and community organizations can offer students a wide range of opportunities to develop personal responsibility and professional, social, and self-advocacy skills according to their interests, talents,

Notes

2. Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of family, school, community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, p. 7.

3. Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Tate, W., & Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*(38), n38.

4. Obiakor, F. (1999). Teacher expectations of minority exceptional learners: Impact on "accuracy" of self-concepts. *Exceptional Children, 66*(1), 39–53.

5. Learn more about *Check and Connect* at http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/model/default.html. Also see "Improving Educational Outcomes for Students with Disabilities" at http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2004/Mar172004

Resources

▶ **Support for Families of Children with Disabilities** organizes useful resources into nine categories: (1) getting started; (2) the laws; (3) parent sites; (4) specific disabilities; (5) education; (6) health; (7) mental health; (8) transition to adulthood; (9) Español. http://www.supportforfamilies.org/internetguide/

▶ *Quality Schooling Framework: Leading Change*, a video from the California Department of Education about fostering a climate in which the school and community work collaboratively, is at http://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/vi/stakeholders.asp#leadingchange

▶ Sanders, M. (2000). **Creating successful school-based partnership programs with families of special needs students.** *The School Community Journal, 10*(2), 37–56. http://www.adi.org/journal/fw00/SandersFall2000.pdf

6. The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 and its reports and findings are at http://www.nlts2.org

7. To learn more about high-quality transition programs, download http://www.fcsn.org/pti/topics/transition/tools/webfm/handouts/exemplary_programs.doc

8. To learn more about the **National Network of Partnership Schools** and to find additional resources on developing partnership programs, see http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/

9. For more information, see *Connecting Schools, Families, and Communities for Youth Success* at http://oregonpirc.org/webfm_send/15 and *Educating Our Children Together: A Sourcebook for Effective School-Family-Community Partnerships* at http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/educatingourchildren_01.cfm

▶ **National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Disabilities** provides information to increase understanding of the specific issues facing African American children and connects parents, educators, and service providers with resources from established networks of individuals and organizations experienced in minority research and special education. http://www.aacld.org/

▶ Sanders, M., & Sheldon, S. (2009). Chapter 4: **Partnering with Families of Children with Disabilities**. In *Principals matter: A guide to comprehensive programs of school, family, and community partnerships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

and abilities. Findings from the *National Longitudinal Transition Study 2*[6] indicate that while transition planning occurs for about 90 percent of all eligible students, greater effort is needed to ensure that families and community agencies and organizations participate fully in the process. To support more collaborative transition planning, the Beach Center on Disability has developed a fact sheet that describes seven quality indicators.[7] This fact sheet can assist schools in evaluating, refining, and enhancing their existing practices.

How Schools Can Develop Partnerships to Better Serve Students with Disabilities

To develop comprehensive and inclusive programs that address the needs and concerns of all students, school personnel must be mindful of the common as well as unique and pressing needs of students with disabilities so that outreach to families and community volunteers, organizations, and agencies is purposeful, relevant, and timely. Through applied research and professional development, several national organizations can help schools to achieve this goal. For example, the National Network of Partnership Schools[8] at Johns Hopkins University provides a research-based framework and tools used by hundreds of schools, districts, and states across the United States. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Center on Dispute Resolution in Special Education also provide tools for developing well-designed and inclusive school, family, and community partnership programs.[9] Through such programs, schools can ensure that the gains in special education experienced over the last four decades will only continue. ◀

Encourage Bravery

Knudsvig also talks about the importance of creating a collaborative culture that "empowers people to take chances. When collaboration is in place, you know the team will pick you up" if you stumble or if something doesn't quite work out. Conversations are about "what you need to do to grow and improve. That just becomes part of the continuous process. "It's a delicate line we walk as leaders," he acknowledges. "I value having ideas to encourage followers, giving employees the training and tools they need to do their jobs well. I respect the complicated jobs they face daily. However, sometimes as a leader you just have to step up to make a difficult decision and take responsibility. But I always try to remember that it's not about me. It's about the kids."

Be Patient

All of these successful leaders talk about the importance of taking "one thing at a time, over time," about resisting the push for the quick fix. Higher scores happen only through stability and patient application of effort. But what they mostly all talk about is the importance of relationships. And the importance of knowing that those take time, too. ◀

Both research and practice have identified what that active involvement looks like. The chart on page 10 lists some those activities for teachers and educational leaders who want to build collaborative cultures in their schools. No one involved in this work will say that it's easy at the beginning. Everyone who is committed to collaboration believes it's important, that it works, and that it's worth the effort. ◀

Across the Divide
Collaboration Between General and Special Educators

Systems, finances, conventions, fears, and sometimes just habits have contributed to a pronounced divide between general and special education in most schools. Why might teachers want to change this? And what might that change look like?

With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, "educators of all types must develop a wider range of collaboration skills that facilitate cooperative planning and instructional activities."[1] These new standards are calling on both general and special education teachers to work as if there were simply one "education," essentially to collaborate. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education articulates this vision: "The success of all children is dependent on the quality of both special education and general education. . . . Special education is not a place apart, but an integral part of education."[2] In a report on leadership, NASDSE writes that "combining the strengths of general and special educators through collaboration is best for students."[3]

What's In It for Students?

The majority of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are "diagnosed with disabilities that do not necessarily mean reduced mental ability [and] the majority of students with disabilities should be able to perform at grade level and graduate from high school with a regular diploma."[4] Yet the academic achievement levels of students with disabilities remain consistently below those of students without disabilities. A 2013 report from the California Comprehensive Center confirms that "collaboration between special education and general education teachers" is a reliable approach to improving school outcomes. The students with disabilities in the districts studied in this report "substantially and consistently outperformed

[students in] similar districts on state performance measures." The school leaders in one of these districts, Val Verde Unified, also "explained that the students in special education are performing well partly because all students in the district are performing well. The philosophy in the district is that special education is not separate from general education; it is treated as part of the whole."[5]

The reason for student success within these collaborative cultures may be obvious. With collaboration in place, all resources and efforts can be coordinated. A child is not shuffled in and out of classrooms to receive isolated services that have nothing to do with anything else going on in his schooling. When the adults involved in the child's education collaborate, they are better able to align what they do to serve a coherent and coordinated vision for the child. There is overlap only inasmuch as repetition and review are parts of an intentional plan to reinforce what the child needs to know and be able to do. And then in schools where the focus is on appropriate services rather than labels—where there is less interest in whether services or strategies fall under general education or special education and more focus on simply the most effective approach for the student—a child with a disability does not perceive herself to be "less than" or "other." She is simply a student.

For teachers, the good news is that collaboration is not just "one more thing" to be heaped upon a busy instructional plate. Collaboration is at the heart of becoming and remaining a good teacher.

Notes

1. NCSET. (2003). *Applied Collaboration*. http://www.ncset.org/teleconferences/transcripts/2003_06.asp
2. NASDSE (2002). *Legislative Priorities*.
3. Keller-Allen, C. (2009). *Superintendent Leadership: Promoting General and Special Education Collaboration*. NASDSE. http://nasdse.org/DesktopModules/DNNspot-Store/ProductFiles/91_13476223-3db5-4974-8d49-be65a2486585.pdf
4. Boser, U. (2009). *Special Education: A Better Perspective.* Center for Public Education. http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Evaluating-performance/Special-education-At-a-glance/Special-education-A-better-perspective-full-report.html
5. Huberman, M. (2014). *Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education*. California Comprehensive Center at WestEd. http://www.calstat.org/ISES/pdf/lessons_from_ca_districts_strong_spec_ed_academic_performance.pdf

Resources

▶ *Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User-Friendly Guide*. (2003). U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/rigorousevid/rigorousevid.pdf

▶ "Learning from Collaboration: The Role of Teacher Qualities." (2006). Brownell, M. T., Adams, A., Sindelar, P, Waldron, N., & Vanhover, S. *Exceptional Children.* http://gsueds2007.pbworks.com/f/teacher%20qualities%20and%20collaboration.pdf

▶ *Overview of Special Education in California*. (January 2013). Taylor, M. Legislative Analyst's Office. http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/special-ed-primer/special-ed-primer-010313.pdf

What's In It For Teachers?

Teachers who collaborate tend to stay in the profession longer, be happier in their work, and experience more success in the classroom than their more solitary counterparts. Both new and veteran teachers are more likely to stay teaching in a school that has an "integrated professional culture" with "site-based, ongoing, rich teacher collaboration across experience levels"[6] and where "all teachers share responsibility for student success."[7] Teachers who have frequent opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues are more likely to say that teaching is a valued profession in their society. These same teachers report higher levels of job satisfaction and confidence in their ability to teach and to motivate students, according to a 2013 international survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.[8] And it comes as no surprise that "collaboration among teachers is important for nurturing the growth of novice teachers."[9] The many additional reasons to collaborate include improved pedagogy, better student behavior management, more student-centered instruction, and greater ability to reflect on and adapt instruction.[10]

How Do You Get There?

Mike Vanderwood, associate professor of school psychology at UC Riverside, says that how and what teachers believe—about themselves, about students, and about the act of teaching—directly influences what they do in the classroom and how well they do it. In order to be an effective collaborator, says Vanderwood, a teacher first needs to believe that working with other teachers and service providers to solve a problem (i.e., address an instructional challenge) will make a difference in student learning—in effect, that collaboration works—and that it's worth the time it takes. However, there are layers of critically important beliefs underneath this one. Fundamental to any educational collaboration is the belief that all students can learn, and from there the belief that when a student isn't learning, something can be done about it. Also important is the belief that one single teacher does not have to figure everything out alone. And if a student doesn't learn at a teacher's first instruction, it doesn't mean that the teacher is a failure;[11] it just means that the student presents a problem to be solved, a challenge to be addressed—and this leads a teacher right back to the belief that working with others is one of the best ways to solve the problem.

Vanderwood and his colleagues have spent the last decade helping school districts and teachers improve instruction and interventions for students at risk for behavioral and academic concerns, including students who receive special education services. To this end, he and his team help teachers enhance their collaboration and team-building skills. He advocates the importance of the following:

1. **Creating an Expectation of Collaboration.** Develop a school culture that emphasizes meeting with others regularly to discuss challenges and evaluate current practices.

2. **Scheduling Collaboration.** Place regular meetings on the school calendar that are dedicated to problem solving and work to include everyone who is necessary in order to understand the problem and make important decisions.

3. **Using a Problem-Solving Model to**

What Can I Do?

Strategies That Support and Sustain Collaboration

What school and district administrators can do:

- Provide professional development that supports collaboration and that includes both general and special educators being trained together.
- Carve out common planning time.
- Support professional learning communities.
- Use hiring practices that target prospective colleagues who are collaborative.
- Create structures that combine the special education and curriculum and instruction departments.

What teachers can do:

- Ask school and district administrators to provide the above resources and supports.
- Co-teach.
- Develop professional learning communities.
- Work to ignore labels, categories, separate departments.
- Develop a commitment to fidelity of practice. No cutting corners.
- Take advantage of the expertise of special education/general education colleagues.
- Learn how to use data.

Structure Collaboration. At problem-solving meetings, use a system that is designed to keep the team focused on identifying the problem and moving quickly to evaluate possible solutions. The structure could be as simple as a mnemonic that lays out the steps of a problem-solving process, or it could involve detailed forms.[12] Good problem-solving models involve logical processes, ensure the best results for students when carefully and systematically followed, and typically contain variations on the basic components of the "ICED[2]," ("iced-squared") model that Vanderwood uses:[13]

1. **I**dentify the problem
2. **C**onfirm with data
3. **E**valuate options
4. **D**ecide on next steps
   a. **I**mplement the intervention
   b. **C**ollect data
   c. **E**valuate the data
   d. **D**ecide about changes to the intervention

Where Do You Start?

On their own, teachers can simply decide to be collaborative. They can find like-minded colleagues, meet informally to coordinate efforts, and learn from and support each other. Yet asking teachers to do one more thing on their own may be asking too much. The *2012 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* [14] presented a rather bleak snapshot of teacher morale across the country. But the survey also showed that educators who expressed a higher job satisfaction shared a common experience: They were more likely to have benefited from effective professional development opportunities and collaborative time with fellow teachers.[15]

Professional development that focuses on collaboration seems to be one solution to both teacher dissatisfaction and student failure.

J. David Cooper, professor and director of reading at Ball State University, studies what all teachers need to know and be able to do in order to be effective. In his publication, *Professional Development: An Effective Research-Based Model*, he shows that when schools "support adult learning and collaboration" and when they provide "educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate," they ensure "the success of every student."[16] And as California is showing, those districts that marry professional development with collaboration seem to be the ones where special education students outperform their peers from other districts.[17]

One additional need is clear: for "more teacher training on the characteristics and instructional strategies essential to success for these students [with learning disabilities]. Only about half of all students have [general education] teachers who receive advice from special educators or other staff on how to meet those needs."[18] But efforts cannot stop with training, no matter how good it is. According to Candace Cortiella, director of The Advocacy Institute, "The real problem is how to provide general and special education teachers the opportunity to apply newly learned collaborative and instructional strategies in the classroom. It follows, then, that a long-term commitment must be made to provide the necessary training and [follow-up] technical assistance. This requires the active involvement of general and special educators and the support of school administrators."[19]

6.   Johnson, S. M., & Kardos, S. M. (March 2002). Redesigning professional development. *Keeping New Teachers in Mind* 59(6), 12–16. http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar02/vol59/num06/Keeping-New-Teachers-in-Mind.aspx

7.   McClure, T. C. (September 2008). The benefits of teacher collaboration. District Administration. http://www.districtadministration.com/article/benefits-teacher-collaboration

8.   The Hechinger Report. *Education by the Numbers. What Makes for Happier Teachers?* http://educationbythenumbers.org/content/teachers-top-performing-countries-teach-less_1404/

9.   Griffin, C., Kilgore, K., Winn J., & Otis-Wilborn, A. (Winter 2008). First-year special educators' relationships with their general education colleagues. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, p. 153. http://www.teqjournal.org/Back%20Issues/Volume%2035/VOL35%20PDFS/35_1/17griffin-35_1.pdf

10. Brownell, M., Adams, Al, Sindelar, P., Waldron, N., & Vanhover, S. (2006). Learning from collaboration: The role of teacher qualities. *Exceptional Children, 72*(2), pp. 169–185. http://gsueds2007.pbworks.com/f/teacher%20qualities%20and%20collaboration.pdf

11. Read about the importance of helping teachers learn to interpret failure (or educational reform) as a challenge and an opportunity for growth rather than as a threat at http://www.education.com/reference/article/teacher-beliefs/

12. For examples, go to http://www.floridarti.usf.edu/resources/topic/academic_support/index.html to download *A Teacher's Guide to Problem Solving Within the Multi-Tiered System of Supports Framework*.

13. Also see the Florida Department of Education's *MTSS Implementation Components*, page 3, at http://www.florida-rti.org/educatorresources/mtss_book_implcomp_012612.pdf.

14. *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*. https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf

15. Walker, T. (April 29, 2013). No more "sit and get": Rebooting teacher professional development. *NEA Today*. http://neatoday.org/2013/04/29/no-more-sit-and-get-getting-serious-about-effective-professional-development/

16. Cooper, J. D. (2004). *Professional Development: An Effective Research-Based Model*. http://www.washingtonstem.org/STEM/media/Media/Resources/Professional-DeveloPment-An-Effective-Research-Based-Model-COOPER.pdf

17. Uberman. (2013).

18. Cortiella, C. (2011). T*he State of Learning Disabilities*. New York, NY: National Center for Learning Disabilities. http://www.ncld.org/images/stories/OnCapitolHill/PolicyRelatedPublications/stateofld/2011_state_of_ld_final.pdf

19. Sharpe, M. N., & Hawes, M. E. *Collaboration Between General and Special Education: Making It Work*. NCSET. http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1097

Becoming Your Child's Best Advocate and . . .

Becoming the Partner You Want to Have

Juno Duenas, Director, Support for Families

There are a lot of myths out there about us parents and about our children: We are special people. We are heroes. We are martyrs. We are only given what we can handle.

Fact is, disabilities are a natural part of life. Our children are not tragedies; they are not angels (at least mine aren't). They are simply children with disabilities. And living with a disability is a lifelong process with many twists and turns, transitions and stages. Our children can have as good a life as anyone out there, with friends, purpose, and community.

My daughter is now 30. For the first 21 years of her life I thought that all I had to do was take good care of her… you know, feed, change diapers, have fun with her, love and cherish, all that stuff. And yet I spent most of her young and adolescent life dealing with medical appointments and hospital visits, Special Education, Regional Center, Mental Health, California Children Services, therapists of all kinds, psychologists, equipment programs, insurance companies. And while many of these agencies are the payer of last resort, they have confusing regulations and eligibility requirements. I spent more time with the phone than I did with my daughter.

Don't get me wrong. We are really, really lucky to have services. I just wish they were a little easier to access—and that there wasn't such "creativity" when interpreting the law.

It has taken me a really long time to be a good partner, and that's the point

of this article: what I have learned about being a partner.

Some people think parent engagement means bringing donuts to meetings or volunteering at school. It can mean that. But I think being engaged means much more. Mostly, if you want to be a good partner, you have to be the partner you want to have.

The partner I want to have, the partner I want to be, is informed and educated, with healthy inner resources and a really good sense of humor. I had to learn this the hard way and on the fly, as so many of us did. So this article about partnering is really about imagining the Parent Boot Camp I wish I'd had when I started this journey with my daughter.

> *The partner I want to be is informed and educated, with healthy inner resources and a good sense of humor.*

Attending Parent Boot Camp

Let me fantasize for a moment: Parent Boot Camp would take place for a week out in the country. It would be by a lake with private cabins (with fireplaces) for entire families so my husband and my children could come with me. Everything would be completely accessible so we wouldn't have to worry about my daughter's wheelchair. The place would have ponies and great food and fun games for every interest and ability. Everyone would be accepting and loving

so no one would ask us to leave because my daughter makes so much noise or eats funny. Did I tell you the staff members who take care of the kids are excellent? So my husband and I can learn without worrying if our kids are okay. And the whole thing is free. That's the fantasy.

So what do we learn? This part is not fantasy. This is really important.

Building on Our Own Skills

The first thing the trainers tell us is that we are the best source of information about our children for the professionals who serve them. The purpose of Boot Camp is to build on the many skills we already have—and to develop the skills and knowledge we need in order to be the best advocates possible for our children. We learn that we can only do this by being effective collaborators and partners with all of the teachers and service providers who will come and go from our children's lives. Then we learn disability history, the laws that effect systems and services, and our rights as parents—and our responsibilities.

Getting Organized

We learn how to keep information organized and accessible, things like birth certificates, immunization records, primary care reports, specialist and therapist reports, IEP records, psychological assessments, and samples of our child's work. We fill out a book about our children and their special needs. It has all the information any agency may need from us so that when we need it, it's there and we just copy it.

Then we learn

• how to use videos to document what

we may not be able to verbalize;

- how to use reports at meetings;
- how to read assessments, highlight observations, identify possible misconceptions, and add comments;
- how to prepare a list of questions and how to develop pros and cons;
- how to prioritize;
- how to monitor the services in the IEP and track whether or not our child is improving with those services;
- how to document; and
- how to speak succinctly.

We learn about the roles and responsibilities of different providers. We are taught how to articulate what we know about our children but sometimes have a hard time communicating, things like what motivates them, what soothes them, what makes them sad or angry. (When my husband and I take turns talking about our daughter, we sound like we're talking about two different children. Sheesh! One of the trainers points out that, of course we see things differently! We are two different people.) We learn that it's okay to have a difference of opinion.

We learn

- how to describe what our child needs for every call, every meeting, every document;
- how to recognize when something isn't working—how to write letters to let people know;
- how to celebrate when something *is* working—and how to write letters to let people know; and
- how to give an "elevator speech": how to focus what we need to say in the shortest period of time.

We practice and practice these things.

Attending to Transitions

Then we focus on transition. We're told that transition starts the day our child is born. We learn how to set our sights high and build towards the day our children move into adulthood. We're told that, if we learn all this, we can successfully prepare our child. We learn that transition and adulthood are not about the severity of the disability; independence is relative. If a child is not able to live on his own, families can still create a vision for what their child's life will be like: where he will live and how he will be cared for.

Becoming a Leader

The focus on our next-to-last day of Boot Camp is on how to be a leader:

- how to give input,
- how to be on a committee,
- how to understand the purpose and objectives of a group before joining, and
- how to contribute as much time and energy to the group as other members.

We discuss the greater good and what it means to think and act as an advocate for other children and families, not just for our own child or family. We learn about different decision-making processes, such as consensus or majority rule. We then focus on how to coach other families and how important it is not to tell someone else what to do, but to help them explore options, help them prioritize, help them make choices for themselves. While families know best what will work for their own members, they need to know their options to make informed choices. We practice saying difficult things to each other. We practice being honest and kind.

Communicating Well

The last day we focus on communication and self-reflection. We talk about taking care of ourselves. We learn that being informed is important, but that how we communicate can make the difference between someone listening to you or not listening. And we learn that the most important thing about communicating is shutting up and listening—making sure that what we hear is what someone is really saying. (I look at my husband and hope he is listening).

We learn how to reach out to members of the team before a meeting to learn what they are thinking. And we learn how to be present to another's pain. We learn that it is easy to identify problems and that finding solutions is the hard part—and everybody's job. We learn how the system is built on "the squeaky wheel" model, and we learn that being assertive does not mean being adversarial. We learn the most important lesson: to assume the best intentions.

Finally, we spend time on activities that focus on ourselves . . . learning to lead from our strengths and to reflect on how to take better care of ourselves and our families.

Wrapping Up

That night we dance. The kids have fun—and make fun of the parents' dancing. And the parents make fun of the parents' dancing. We get teary eyed because we know we have a brief moment to make this impact and then they will be on their own. We celebrate because we love our awesome, spirited children.

Sunday it's time to go home. We're optimistic, ready to engage as parents. Honestly, it is so easy to be a good partner and to be engaged when you've been well informed, when you are well fed, rested, when your children have been cared for with inspiration and celebration, when you have simply felt supported. Fact is, whether we like it or not, we have to learn a lot in order to partner in the care for our children with special needs.

Supporting Students as Active Partners in Their Own Education
Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

Parents and teachers can help children with disabilities become independent, capable adults. The to-do list starts early.

When students with disabilities have practice making decisions, considering (and accepting) consequences, thinking ahead, and advocating for themselves, they are on the path to becoming collaborative partners in their own education—participants rather than bystanders. These students "feel better about themselves, take more risks, ask for the help and clarification they need, and consequently do better in school and in life."[1] They are more likely to assume that they have the right and the ability to interact with teachers and other adults, express their own opinions and preferences, ask questions, and generally engage in the world around them. As "self-determined" individuals, they are ultimately happier than people who operate without a sense of their own agency.[2]

Not surprisingly, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center has identified self-advocacy as an important, evidence-based predictor of postschool employment, education, and independent living success.[3] Because of their importance in school and postschool outcomes, self-advocacy skills are being directly taught, typically as one of the transition requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). But formal transition planning—and a focus on self-advocacy and self-determination skills—often doesn't start until students are entering their teens. Experienced parents and teachers will tell you that this is too late.

Start Early

"The earlier, the better." says Kelly Young, executive director of the Warmline Family Resource Center in Sacramento. "Start at birth!"

Sara Jocham, assistant superintendent of special education in the Capistrano Unified School District agrees that parents and teachers cannot teach self-advocacy skills too early. "At any age you can start asking a child questions, encourage him to articulate preferences,

urge him to reflect on what worked and what didn't. Talk about strengths, about how to get better at things that are important, about how to compensate for what he can't do well."

Offer Choices

"Start by giving them choices," says Young. "Self-advocacy is about giving young people the ability to make choices, to think for themselves, and, yes, even suffer the consequences." Young's experience as a mother of a child with cerebral palsy has convinced her that there's no better time for children to practice making choices than when the consequences are small.

"As parents, we want to protect our kids and make the 'right' decision for them. But we end up overprotecting them and depriving them of opportunities to learn. We must have higher expectations of our children's abilities."

Hyla Rachwal has a disability and serves as a student representative on the California Advisory Commission on Special Education. Speaking from her own experience, she says that "our parents have ideas for us and for our futures. These are not necessarily our ideas. We need to be the ones to step up, to know what we want, to say what we want, and to be heard. This is our life!"

And of the choices that young people will make, Young insists that "there is no such thing as a mistake, only an opportunity to learn something."

Jocham says that too often she sees parents and teachers who, out of well-meaning efforts to "take care of" their children and students with disabilities (or without), inadvertently teach passivity by assuming they know what the child wants or needs or assuming the child can't know or figure it out. "Too

often, when a child has been met with this attitude over and over, by the time he's 16, 17, 18, he doesn't have the skills he needs to move into the adult world and become successfully independent." And he certainly doesn't have the skills to be an agent in his own education.

Barbara Schulman is the adult transition teacher in Saddleback Valley Unified School District and vice-chair of the California Advisory Commission on Special Education. She has been working with children with significant disabilities for more than 30 years, and she agrees wholeheartedly with Young. "Please allow children to make their own decisions!" says Schulman. "Then see what happens. Start with relatively inconsequential things. Let them decide not to take a lunch to school. To wear flimsy sandals when they're going on a long hike. They get to own the consequences—and to start thinking ahead and thinking for themselves. If the outcome of their choice isn't so great, the experience provides a perfect opportunity [for parents and teachers] to talk with them about why they made that choice, what their other options were—and to think about whether they would make the same choice again. They learn how to consider consequences— and learn to make safe choices when what they decide really matters."

Schulman, too, urges both parents and teachers not to make decisions for their children and students. "You can never do too much *with* them. You can always do too much *for* them."

"Of course, the kinds of choices we give a child will depend on the age," says Young. "As they get older, you'll want to give them greater say and different choices. But with practice they will get better."

Teach Curiosity

Jocham sees the advent of the Common Core State Standards with their focus on higher-level thinking skills and problem solving as particularly beneficial to students with disabilities, helping them become more aware of learning how they learn and positioning "all students to become more effective lifelong learners. Teachers and parents

Coaching Tips

✔ *Don't answer when children or students are asked questions. Let them speak for themselves.*

✔ *Encourage appropriate assertiveness, a confident voice, and appropriate volume. Encourage a shy child or a child with a timid voice to speak bravely; help a child tone down a voice that's too loud.*

✔ *Encourage your child to express his or her needs appropriately; this includes helping a child learn his or her rights—to be informed but not to feel entitled.*

✔ *Teach your child to say a polite but firm "no, thank you" to unneeded help.*

both can help children at the earliest age learn self-questioning skills, which lead to self-discovery, self-knowledge, self-advocacy. You want to help students learn to dig deeper. Ask them, 'Why did you struggle with that. What helped you

succeed in that?' Maybe they'll find out that they struggled because they sat next to a window, and the lawnmower outside was loud. Or that they succeeded because they sat in front of the class and could pay attention better. You want students to develop a habit of being aware of what is happening to them—what is helping and what is hindering."

Let Them Own Their Disability

"In every way," says Schulman, "the disability is theirs and theirs alone. Parents and teachers can't take on the disability for them." In Schulman's experience, once a child sees her disability as one part of who she is, she is in a better position to understand that part of herself and better able to practice how to ask for what she needs. "Help them to know themselves. Know their disability. Own their disability" is Schulman's mantra. "Even when a child has low intellectual ability, that doesn't mean the child's self-esteem has to be low. They can still know what they want. They can learn to advocate for themselves and even to run their own IEP meetings."

Coach the Child

One key principle of self-advocacy involves learning to say those things that are important for others to know. "If a child has a processing disorder," says Schulman, "help him practice saying, 'Please talk more slowly.' If a child has difficulty understanding words at all, help him practice, 'Please show me a picture.'" Advice on coaching in the list on the left, adapted from an article posted by the National Federation of the Blind,[4] can help parents and teachers to guide students toward that ability to say what they need in order to get the help, support, and understanding they require.

1. Can Learn Society. (2013). *Self Advocacy*. http://canlearnsociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LC_Self-Advocacy_N2.pdf

2. Wehmeyer, M. (2007). *What Works for Special Needs Learners: Promoting Self-Determination in People with Developmental Disabilities*. Guildford Press, p. 61.

3. *Evidence-based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition*. (2010). National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center. http://www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/pdf/ebps/ExecsummaryPPs.pdf

4. Castellano, C. (2010). *Developing Self-Advocacy Skills: Or The Pursuit of a Normal Life*. https://nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr32/2/fr320210.htm

5. Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center. (n.d.). *Bullying and Harassment of Students with Disabilities*. http://www.pacer.org/bullying/resources/students-with-disabilities/

6. Fletcher, A. (2008). *The Architecture of Ownership*. Educational Leadership. http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov08/vol66/num03/The-Architecture-of-Ownership.aspx

▶ **Essential Lifestyle Planning**, a guided process for learning how someone wants to live and developing a plan to help make it happen http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/reading-room/how/person-centred-planning/essential-lifestyle-planning-.aspx

▶ **Research to Practice—Self-Determination: Supporting Successful Transition**, by C. D. Bremer, M. Kachgal, and K. Schoelle. At the bottom of this Web page is a useful list titled "Promoting Self-Determination in Youth with Disabilities: Tips for Families and Professionals." http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=962

▶ **Strength-Based Assessments** are the focus of the Center for Effective Collaboration. http://cecp.air.org/interact/expertonline/strength/sba.asp

▶ **Self-Advocacy: Know Yourself; Know What You Need; Know How to Get It** from WrightsLaw is at http://www.wrightslaw.com/nltr/14/nl.0121.htm

▶ **I'm Determined**, part of the Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project, offers films, training modules, guides, and more for parents, teachers, and students in support of self-determination skills. http://www.imdetermined.org/

▶ **Sound Out: Student Voice in Schools** offers examples of meaningful student involvement. http://www.soundout.org/examples.html

Ready-made and well-practiced responses in key situations do more than help a child in the classroom. Jocham has seen how coaching a child to have the right words in critical situations can go far to prevent bullying—which is particularly important, since students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied than their nondisabled peers.[5] Jocham's advice is to "help students have the words to respond with dignity: 'I'm just as smart as you. I just mix my letters up'" is a phrase she offers as an example for students with dyslexia.

Knowing that you have agency in the world, that you have a right to respond in your own best interests—and that you know what those interests are—make a powerful difference in the lives of students with disabilities. In fact, helping a child to know that she has the right to simply say "No" in a strong and firm voice may be the most important statement you help her practice.

Include Children in the Process

Kelly Young's daughter is now 18 and ready to move out of the house. Young believes that this young woman's independence developed in great part because "I have always taken my daughter to all of the meetings that involve her: the doctor's office, IEP meetings, everything."

Young is a firm believer in the saying, "Nothing about me without me."

"People get busy and forget to remind parents of these things—that their children can and should be included" in meetings. Young has also seen well-meaning teachers be reluctant to include students because they think, "We don't want them there; we'll be talking about their weaknesses." But if the process is to be collaborative and authentic, according

to Young, "all involved parties need to be included."

Young gives her local family resource center credit for helping her gather the information, strength, and determination she needed to help her daughter be successful. "There is no handbook for this. We need to be informed about what's possible, what's right, and what's best for children." Parent centers are designed to do just that (see page 17).

Work as a Team

"Parents are experts. Teachers are experts. Children are experts," all in their own ways, insists Schulman. "They all need to see themselves as members of the same team, and they need to work as a team. No one is right or wrong 100 percent of the time."

"Parents are too often intimidated by the special education process," says Young, "and so are too often willing to let everyone else make decisions. This is not collaboration. Successful outcomes require collaboration, with everyone involved at the table." While Young asks teachers to "encourage and welcome parents as partners and to value their expertise," she consistently returns to that even more-important habit of allowing "children to advocate for themselves" and to make choices—both important and inconsequential—for themselves. "These things are in the law, but you can't wait until they're 16."

Allow Freedoms

"We make these assumptions," says Young, "about what people can do and about what they shouldn't be doing, which drives decisions to institutionalize people so they end up without any choice at all—in how they spend their time, when they go to bed, what they eat. We end up taking away all of their personal freedoms and rights because of our fear

that something might happen that makes us uncomfortable."

"This is her life," Young says of her daughter. The ability to find a balance in guiding and protecting children and giving them freedom "hinges on the relationship," which leads back to the importance of starting early and letting them fail when the consequences involve only a bruised knee or a late school assignment—"so that the relationship is in place" when the consequences of the decisions become critical.

Find the Real Conversation

According to Schulman, "Our habit as adults is to assume we know what the child really means. We jump too quickly" to conclusions about what the child means and wants. She encourages parents and teachers to be open-minded and curious about what children with disabilities say, particularly about their hopes and dreams for the future. "Saying to a child, 'Oh! You can never to that,' is a protective response—and not helpful," she says. "Instead, explore what's behind the child's words. Ask reflective questions. Seek the child's perspective. Ask another question with real curiosity, not an agenda. If a child wants to be a policeman, maybe what he really wants is to wear a uniform or to help people. If a child says he wants to be a professional basketball player, maybe what he wants is just to be around sports. Maybe he could work in a sporting goods store.

"Explore with them what it is they really like. Most importantly, ask yourself what you can do to help keep even a part of that dream alive. Because if children are regularly told 'no,'" she counsels, "they will live with an attitude of defeat and inadequacy. If children are frequently told 'yes, let's explore!' they are set on an entirely different trajectory."

Dream. Make a Plan. Practice. Do. Reflect.

Kelly Young has developed what she calls "steps for life": 1) dream about something, 2) plan a first step, 3) practice whatever skills are necessary, 4) execute the plan, and then 5) reflect on how things went. To keep a dream alive, Young believes that it's important to start small, especially if it's a big dream, "because otherwise it's impossible to know *how* to start."

The example Young offers is that of a student with disabilities who dreams of becoming an actress. Her realistic start involves planning to take an acting class, taking the class, performing in a play, and then reflecting on how it went.

These general steps, Young insists, can be taught to children at any age, creating a clear strategy for making efforts purposeful and focused rather than random and vague. The approach also allows children to "shape [their dream] until it makes sense. Until you experience it, it is still only a dream in your head. You can't know it." Young's steps "take the dream at an appropriate pace."

Final Note for Teachers

Teachers can be powerful influences in the lives of children when they model how to work collaboratively with others. And the student is probably the most important person for teachers to collaborate *with*. By including students in decisions about their own learning, a teacher can make school something that isn't just happening to them but rather the vehicle through which they decide to change themselves[6]—and maybe even the world. Clearly doing whatever is possible to help children become active, critical-thinking participants in their own education and their own lives is "what's best for children." ◄

Although there is no Parent Boot Camp (yet), we do have Family Resource Centers, Family Empowerment Centers, and Parent Training and Information Centers throughout the state (see below). These places provide the kinds of trainings and support depicted in pretend Boot Camp. Not just for parents, but for professionals, too! Please make use of them. Get to know the rules of the road, how to partner and how to lead, and someday—well, maybe I'll see you as one of the trainers at Parent Boot Camp! ◄

More About Parent Centers

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs), Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs), and Family Empowerment Centers (FECs) all provide training and information to parents, family members, and guardians of children and young adults with disabilities as well as to providers who serve those children, to enable them to participate effectively in the decisions, processes, and systems related to individuals with disabilities. These centers are funded, directly or indirectly, through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Many of them may also house Early Start Family Resource Centers or Prevention Resource and Referral Services (**http://www.frcnca.org/frcnca-directory**), funded by the Department of Developmental Services; and/or Family Voices of California (**http://www. familyvoicesofca.org/planning groups_map2.html**), a support network funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. There are some differences among these organization: PTIs and CPRCs serve families with children from birth through 26; FECs serve families of children ages 3 to 22. One thing is true for them all: they are interested in partnering with you. Look them up and get involved! To find the center nearest you, go to **http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qa/ caprntorg.asp**

meetings. Among other initiatives, it established a parent contact for families of students with disabilities in every school, and it offers workshops and training sessions for parents, including a series of discussions throughout the current school year on the new Smarter Balanced Assessments. An annual Family Empowerment Conference focuses on building relationships and strengthening parents' ability to participate in the educational process.

That's definitely a change, says Webb. "In the past there were many years of tension and dysfunction" in the relationship between the CAC and the district, compounded by "a lack of transparency in operations, procedures, and policy" that kept parents and community advocates in the dark about what was happening in the district. "Because the district or the [special education] department rarely came to us to get feedback or ask us to participate, we were finding out about things after they were implemented."

Now, Webb says, "we've seen that turn around in the last two years." In addition to the introduction of the Coffee Chats, she says, "CAC people are included along with special education professionals in training on new procedures or best practices, and the district now pays for parents to go to conferences."

As a member of the San Francisco School Board, a former member of the CAC, and the parent of a child with an IEP, Rachel Norton has seen the changes in the district's approach to the community over time. "In my early years, the district had a long way to go in seeing parents as full partners. Now I'm seeing more willingness to collaborate, less fear of what we are putting at risk

by collaboration. I've been struck by the way special education has opened up—working with the CAC, engaging families."

For SFUSD, collaboration extends beyond parents and family advocacy groups to agencies that provide services to the district. "We recognize that as a district we cannot do our work alone," says Ruth Grabowski, a coordinator of Family and Community Partnerships. "We rely on community and public agencies to serve our students, especially those who are historically marginalized." Grabowski works with leaders of the agencies and reviews the memoranda of understanding they must complete in order to provide health-related, case management, and therapy services, among others.

There has been a change in how some of those services are delivered to schools, especially mental health services. "In the past we would make referrals to our county partners [in the departments of public and mental health], and they would evaluate the students and provide services," says Lisa Miller, director of psychological services in special education. When that responsibility and funding shifted to the schools, "we hired six psychologists and took on all the evaluations. Now services take place in school, and we work very collaboratively with the county, meeting twice a month with the department of mental health to go over progress."

Collaborating Within Schools

While strengthening its relationships with external constituencies, the district also is focused on in-house collaboration. In its "Vision 2025: Reimagining Public Education in San Francisco for a New Generation" the district envisions a team-based teaching approach in all

classrooms—especially in later grades—that includes special education and subject-area teachers, behavioral experts, and social skills coaches collaborating to ensure that all students get the attention and assistance they need to be successful. But educators aren't waiting for 2025. Already there is greater cooperation among departments at the district level—special education and curriculum and instruction are at the same table now—and between special and general education staff at individual school sites.

Two years ago the district introduced inclusive practices, firmly supporting the position that every student is a general education student first—some just need additional supports to succeed. Inclusion allowed students to be mainstreamed to the level of their ability. One third of schools at a time adopted these practices, with the last group added this year. At first, says Rachel Norton, "there was a lot of fear about what it would mean for teachers and the other students." But the district provided training and technical assistance coaching for the staff, and there is currently "a lot of co-teaching going on in the district," says Blanco. "As with any partnership, the teachers must work together collaboratively on content, accommodations, and modifications." Although Blanco, who came to San Francisco three years ago, receives much of the credit for the implementation, she says "it's really about a team. Years of work was done before me. There was a grassroots group of parents and leaders in the community who were waiting for a team in the district to embrace inclusive practices."

Being Responsive

It's not just proactive steps like inclusion that lead to better collaboration. The district also has to be

ready to react to community concerns. Juno Duenas is executive director of Support for Families, a community-based organization for professionals and families of children with special needs. She tells of the time last spring when the district changed the way it was allocating special education teachers and paraprofessionals. "We saw that families were upset by the changes, so we called and said we wanted a town hall meeting" to discuss their concerns. "The district was willing to do that, and the conversation was documented and published." Like others, Duenas says she has seen "a new level of partnership and a willingness to try new things."

Hiring an Ombudsman

That willingness includes bringing an ombudsman for special education on board this past summer and hiring a consultant to examine disproportion-ality in the district. Ombudsman Laura Savage, herself the mother of a child with special needs, describes her role as "a neutral liaison between family, staff, and the community." Parents contact her with complaints or concerns about issues, such as school placement or an IEP not being followed. "I listen to them; it makes a difference when people feel they are being heard. Then I look at their child's IEP, and I speak with the appropriate people in the district." The goal, she says, is "to mediate the issue without it going any further. It's important that we put the student first, that we put adult issues and egos aside. Ninety percent of the time we can find common ground."

Savage's office is at district headquarters in downtown San Francisco and accessible by public trans-portation "so parents have easy access," she says, "but I'm also willing to go out to the community or even to their homes."

Because she is relatively new on the job—and the position was vacant for several years—Savage has been visiting school sites and meeting with both special and general education staff. "The title of ombudsman is kind of off-putting," she says, "but some schools are very welcoming. They know it's not threatening. For me, it's how can I help them see the benefits of inclusion? How can I support the staff in reaching out to parents?"

Reaching out to African American parents whose children are disproportionally represented in special education is the assignment of Mildred Browne, a former assistant superintendent in the Mt. Diablo School District who is serving as a technical assistance facilitator. "I work with the district as a neutral party to look for reasons when there is significant disproportionality," she says. "This is an ongoing conversation between general and special education. In fact, all of my meetings have been webs of collaboration involving general and special education." Browne looks at school climate, assesses available interventions, and meets monthly with the African-American parent advisory group "to bring parents into the conversation."

Starting Early

For San Francisco Unified, collaboration with parents and community organizations is a continuous process that begins before a child with a disability enters school, and it continues through postgraduation transition. Parents are contacted prior to the first IEP meeting and receive a brief overview along with printed materials that explain what to expect, their role in the process, and what to do if they are dissatisfied with the outcome.

At the other end of the school experience the district has partnered with The Arc, an agency that serves adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Students between the ages of 18 and 22 who have earned a diploma or certificate of completion may enter a lottery for a place at The Arc, where they will attend transition classes that used to take place at their high school and have opportunities for supported employment. The program, now in its third year, "helps students over the threshold to independence," says Norton.

Even with preschool to postschool collaboration, there is still work to be done, says Blanco. "Empowering parents to have the knowledge to support their children" is a constant goal. "We have to make sure that communication is ongoing and that our messaging is clear." Superintendent Carranza says the district is working to break down any barriers to collaboration by "investing in community schools coordinators, family liaisons, learning support professionals, and many other staff who are specifically dedicated to ensuring that teachers, families, and community service providers are working together in the best interest of our students." ◄

Putting It All Together:
Collaboration in SF Unified

There's something new brewing at the monthly meetings of San Francisco's Community Advisory Committee (CAC) for Special Education. The meetings still start on time and deal with such topics as the Common Core Standards and new student assessments. But now parents who have concerns about the education of their children with disabilities can arrive 45 minutes early for a "Coffee Chat" and raise those concerns directly with special education supervisors from the San Francisco Unified School District.

Questioning the IEP process? Unclear about a new school policy? Upset about school placement? Come to these open forums and be heard.

The chats, initiated by Assistant Superintendent for Special Education Elizabeth Blanco, have "gone a long way to opening communication between parents and educators," says Kimberly Webb, chair of the CAC.

Collaborating with Parents and Community Partners

The Coffee Chats are just one manifestation of a recent and observable tack toward increased collaboration between San Francisco Unified on the one hand and parents and community organizations on the other. The non-school actors attribute this change to greater transparency on the part of the district and the commitment of top administrators, including Superintendent Richard A. Carranza and Assistant Superintendent Blanco. The administration has officially made "Authentic Partnerships Focused on Student Success" a goal of its 2013–2016 strategic plan for special education, and that includes partnerships with parents, the community, and agencies that provide services to the district. But it is parents that the document calls "the second most important group of stakeholders regarding special education services, second only to the students themselves." Collaborating with parents—"the experts when it comes to their kids," says Carranza—"is in the best interest of our students. We aren't just seeking to engage with parents; we are seeking to empower parents to be well-informed advocates for their children."

To that end, the district provides materials in English, Spanish, and Chinese for its diverse population and offers translation and child care services at

To subscribe

▶ *The Special EDge* newsletter is available free of charge to California residents.

▶ To subscribe, send your name, postal address, position, and contact e-mail and/or phone number to CalSTAT, 5789 State Farm Drive, Suite 230, Rohnert Park, CA 94928. Or phone 707-849-2275, or e-mail **giselle. blong@calstat.org**.

▶ You can also subscribe online at **www.calstat.org/ publications/subscribe_ form.php**.

▶ Request an e-subscription from Giselle Blong at **giselle.blong@calstat.org**.