VUE

Annenberg Institute for School Reform | *Voices in Urban Education*

Educating Vulnerable Pupils

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Educating the Most Vulnerable Pupils

Robert Rothman

The imperative to educate all students to high standards has challenged educators in virtually every community. While many schools and communities have succeeded in raising performance overall, achievement gaps remain stubbornly persistent. Large numbers of students continue to lag behind. And these tend to be the same students the education system has, historically, served poorly – low-income students, students of color, and students with learning needs.

Our continued failure to educate all students well has serious consequences. The children left behind tend to lack many of the social and family supports that their more-advantaged peers possess. They are truly "the most vulnerable pupils," as Monica Teixeira de Sousa put it in a recent issue of this publication. Without a strong education system, many young people will face a bleak future.

In part, continued existence of the achievement gap puts a spotlight on the shortcomings of our efforts at educational improvement. The most common approaches, research and experience clearly show, may not be reaching the most vulnerable pupils. Our strategies may not be enough to educate all students to high levels. Accountability systems signal problems but do not suggest solutions or provide resources to help. Common instructional-improvement approaches tend to help many students but not necessarily the growing number of students with significant challenges. And it is increasingly clear that students who are behind in school also lack access to the out-of-school supports that better-performing students receive.

Robert Rothman is a principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and editor of Voices in Urban Education.

What would it take to fulfill the promise of education reform and educate *all* students to high levels? For one thing, it would take a recognition that all young people need supports, but the kind and amount will vary from child to child. Also, educators and community leaders need to think about ways to integrate supports for children and families with educational supports. Schools alone cannot educate all students well.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* looks at ways to address the needs of the most vulnerable pupils.

Pia Durkin lays out a vision for a system that provides an array of supports for children in both general education and special education in order to reach 98 percent of students.

Beatrice Bridglall describes a program under way in Harlem to help parents bring up young children who are healthy and ready to learn.

Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson addresses the role of principals in leading schools that avoid the over-representation of African American youths in special education by addressing students' needs in culturally responsive ways.

Dwight Watson considers his own experience and his work as a teacher educator in preparing teachers who are able to help diverse students learn the critical skill of literacy.
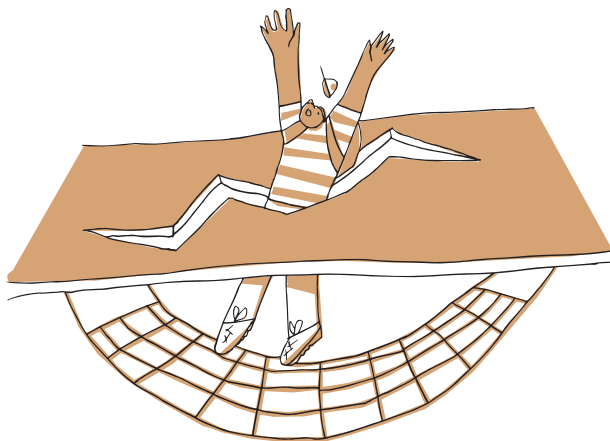
Lucretia Murphy discusses how five cities are providing alternative pathways for students who are struggling or who have left school.

Underlying each of these articles is a potentially radical idea: that the education system should consider each student as an individual and provide the support that he or she needs. This idea is radical because large systems are not designed to provide individualized supports. They were created to provide basically the same level of supports for all students. Such systems work efficiently, but not effectively for all students. The most vulnerable pupils lose out.

Fortunately, many urban education systems are abandoning the one-size-fits-all approach. Cities are experimenting with a wide range of educational approaches, including virtual schools and charter schools, as well as traditional schools. Districts are creating new schools that cater to students' varied needs and interests. Schools are creating learning plans for every student.

Despite their promise, though, these efforts remain fairly small-scale. Only by expanding them can cities ensure that all students have access to educational opportunities and supports that address their needs. In order to educate *all* students well, we need to educate *each* student well.

System Reform to Reach 98 Percent

Pia Durkin

A system that unifies general education and special education through an ample array of supports for children will enable districts to reach 98 percent of students.

Pia Durkin is superintendent of schools of Attleboro, Massachussetts, and a former associate director at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

For most of the past two decades, school reformers have largely ignored special education. Most reform efforts have emphasized school-by-school improvement, bypassing the district and its central office as agents for reform. Special education, on the other hand, has been primarily district-based, with a stronger focus on managerial and compliance issues than on achievement and equity.

This discrepancy has worked against collective responsibility and shared ownership for the results of *all* students and has tacitly supported the belief that only some students are capable of high achievement. Additionally, the complex legal issues within special education (supporting hard-won individual rights for students with disabilities) act as barriers to a systems view in which special education and general education work in substantive and sustained partnership.

Recently, however, the scope of disaggregated data mandated by No Child Left Behind has increased attention to the low achievement results for students in special education, which now directly affect district and school adequate yearly progress (AYP) status. Despite conscientious efforts, the achievement gap stubbornly persists in districts where significant portions of students are served through special education. Most attention has been focused on the achievement gap between racial groups (particularly between White students and students of color). Less attention has been paid to the complexities of the achievement gap where race and special education intersect. A new sense of urgency calls for a review of the complex needs of students served within urban districts and which students can be best served through special education programs.

A significant percentage of students in special education, when seen with their general education peers in non-school settings, are not readily identifiable as needing specialized services. They are *not* among the 2 percent of the school population who have clear and identifiable "low-incidence disabilities," such as blind, deaf, or multiply handicapped students, whose status is not subject to individual interpretation, as is the case with learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities. They do persistently struggle with literacy and math assignments. They demonstrate cumulative gaps in learning, falling further behind as the content

that have led to the separate personnel preparation systems, separate budgetary allocations, and separate legal and policy underpinnings that are often formulated far from practitioners who are responsible for implementation.

The success – or failure – of public education as a whole now unites general and special education. The major issues faced by districts in *special education* – inappropriate referrals, low achievement results, and inadequate coordination of resources – are, in fact, symptoms of *systemwide* problems that require unified solutions. And, as the entity that has the authority, scale, and resources to rise to these challenges, the school system is the right place to create those solutions.

The Vision: Unifying General and Special Education

Imagine a district with a successful partnership between special education and the broader system in which it is embedded. A coordinated array of supports and opportunities reflects the depth and breadth of differentiated services available for both adults and students across a system where special education is no longer a silo. Together, system leaders – within and beyond special education – focus their reform priorities on the students who are furthest behind and who need the most supports to reach proficiency. And, together, these leaders develop strategies to share resources needed to support those priorities.

Every school in this visionary district meets AYP status for students with disabilities and English-language learners. These students' assets have enriched every classroom in the district. Practitioners discuss student work,

grows more complex. They quickly become disengaged when instruction does not meet their needs, often resulting in troubling behaviors.

These students are soon referred to special education, to be served "somewhere else" rather than within the general education classroom. They constitute a large proportion of those who drop out, who fail to graduate on time, and who have fewer postsecondary options. Only a third of students with disabilities graduate from high school with a regular diploma, compared with more than two-thirds of all students, and the dropout rate of students with disabilities is more than twice that of other students (*Education Week* 2004).

Today's educational environment calls for a new approach to the now-separate general and special education programs. It calls for a comprehensive and unified system that goes significantly beyond timeworn boundaries and organizational structures and the traditional "hats" district leaders currently wear. This new approach requires bold educational leaders who can question and challenge the assumptions

analyze gaps in performance, make their work public through peer observations, and model sound practice for one another. School staff embrace the notion that each student will make satisfactory progress, and they commit to reaching that goal by collaborating with and learning from each other.

Students transferring into this district who, on entry, had been earmarked for special education services, demonstrate strong academic progress. A parent who had previously threatened to sue the district for lack of supports to her child is now mobilizing the community to pass a bond issue that will increase resources for the district. And, most important, every student – with or without a mandated Individualized Education Program (IEP) – thrives in school because each gets what he or she needs to succeed.

The Challenge: Competing, Not Collaborating, Systems

The reality of urban districts today is, of course, dramatically different from the picture above. Rather than emphasizing equitable outcomes for all students, most systems focus on compliance with federal and state mandates as the indicator of success for special education. Shared ownership is squelched by fragmentation in structure and process. Decisions are linked to labels and program titles, instead of student needs. Examples of these dichotomies are prevalent in district practice:

- Despite some progress, the achievement gap persists in urban districts between students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities and their White, native English-speaking peers. Disability identification processes are intertwined with race and class issues.

- Nationally, graduation and dropout rates, as well as employment status, are persistently lower for students served in urban districts (Swanson 2004).

- The presence of special education students within schools often leads to inaccurate perceptions about their effect on schools' not meeting AYP targets. Although some parents and teachers attribute schools' failure to make AYP to the low performance of students with disabilities, only 13 percent of schools were so identified because of the performance of that group alone (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2006).

- As district resources dwindle, budgeting practices often become a zero-sum game where allocations for some must balance with "not enough for all." Resentment breeds among special-interest groups, and collaborative solutions are often blocked by inadequate communication and limited understanding of which legal requirements are binding and which allow for flexibility to serve a larger purpose.

- District and school accountability often fail to address the expectations and belief systems of the adults within the system who can impact the achievement of certain subgroups of students.

Today's educational environment calls for a new approach to the now-separate general and special education programs. It calls for a comprehensive and unified system that goes significantly beyond timeworn boundaries.

- Building the capacity of all staff through professional learning for both general and special educators is not standard practice and is often used in only a limited way as a response to district crises and low test scores.

According to Beth Harry and Janette Klingner (2006, p. 173), system leaders are confronted with the "inequities related to the three main phases of the process: children's opportunity to learn prior to referral, the decision-making processes that led to special education placement, and the quality of [student outcomes from] the special education experience

There are more similarities than differences between the academic and social/emotional needs of general education students and *most* special education students.

itself." But these leaders find few systemic tools and processes to help them unpack these challenges and devise solutions for collaboration between general and special education.

Superintendents and others are increasingly asking for help in applying large-scale reform practices to the tensions and challenges of special education and in connecting these issues to general education practices. The following sections suggest a new approach to the relationship between general and special education and a starting place for an ongoing conversation focused on solutions to address the challenges to achieving such a system.

Taking a New Approach

For the *system* envisioned earlier to become reality, general and special education *leaders* and major *stakeholders* in urban education need new ways of thinking about how general and special education work together. Special educators can do a better job of defining the issues, and general educators can do a better job of asking the right questions, enabling both groups to learn with and from each other. Political leaders, city council members, parents, and school board members will also benefit from considering the issues related to special education as part of the larger reform picture.

The complex nuances of special education have inhibited such dialogue across the general and special education sectors. A comprehensive and unified approach is now called for as the most effective way to support *all* students. There are more similarities than differences between the academic and social/emotional needs of general education students and *most* special education students. By acknowledging that *every* student needs differentiated supports at various points in his or her educational career, urban systems can more readily provide for those needs by building an array of coordinated supports across general and special education that captures the underlying relationships between the adults in the system who will plan for, use, and continually refine the supports and opportunities within the array.

This array would be dynamic and flexible, as well as broad and deep, to allow for thoughtful decisions regarding what both the adults and students need to achieve success. It would encompass the full range of supports and opportunities for students served through both general and special edu-

cation, as well as whatever level of ongoing or occasional supports each child may need.

More than a mere list of services to "pick and choose" from, the array of services would be accompanied by structures and processes that provide the "scaffolding" for good decision making based on data. And the array would incorporate accountability in assessing the impact of particular supports, how to measure their effect, and what adjustments are needed to ensure results. For example, the analysis of how schoolwide positive behavioral support practices are impacting out-of-class and out-of-school suspensions would be valuable data to gather and use. This array would not be bound simply by resource issues but, rather, would represent a "change of mindset" as to how to realign what currently exists in separate and disjointed segments into a unified framework.

These supports would include:

- Teaching and learning supports (e.g., literacy strategies)
- Social/emotional supports (e.g., counseling and mental health)
- Systemic organizational supports (e.g., school climate program expectations)
- Community/family supports or extended learning opportunities (e.g., partnerships with cultural organizations)

These supports would be connected and informed by several "contexts," including:

- Cultural beliefs and expectations
- Policy and legal context
- Organizational context

Such a comprehensive array of supports and opportunities would help urban districts serve both general education students and those special education students who are in the *mild disabilities range,* for whom referral and identification for special education services are most susceptible to differing professional interpretations. The remaining 2 percent of students with significant, low-incidence disabilities have particular needs that are amply documented in the literature.
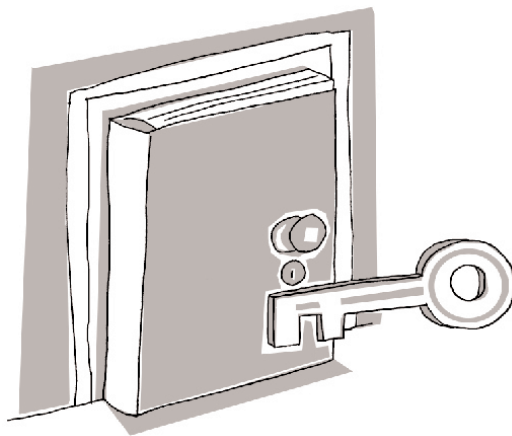
Anticipating and Navigating the Minefields in Thought and Action

The issue of restructuring special education within the context of general education reform is not a new issue. The question remains: *Why has it not already been done?* To plan and construct the array described above, several "minefields" need to be navigated. Key tensions and challenges exist within urban districts.

Outcomes versus Process

The district is responsible for compliance with federal and state regulations; schools are responsible for teaching and learning. But, at schools, teaching and learning for special education students have had lower priority than

compliance mandates. Districts that are deemed "successful" in special education need to be defined not by their compliance status but with their laser-like focus on supports for schools with respect to achievement for students. Those supports need to be articulated and shared as part of the above array and require a balance between centralized and school-based autonomy issues.

Progress versus Proficiency

A critical component for the array is a data system in which key information regarding referrals to special education (grade levels, reasons, service options, etc.) is reviewed and analyzed. Data that measure the progress of students are important for both internal and external communication regarding special education.

Prevention versus Reaction

The lack of an array of supports in general education and limited assessment tools are two of the reasons for inappropriate referrals to special education for students of color and those with different language backgrounds. *Investment in building preventive programs* should become the norm, rather than

the typical response of additional special education services that is required when students have been failed by general education. This dynamic also comes into play in planning for new initiatives. For example, as small learning communities take root within the high school reform context, their lack of planning for balance in dealing with large numbers of special education students has seriously undermined efforts in terms of equity and access.

Capacity Building versus Quick Fixes

The perspectives and issues of the adults in the system should not get in the way of unified programs serving all students. How leaders interact, how professional development is planned and implemented, and how the central office communicates and supports schools throughout the district are among the issues that need to be dealt with directly.

When system leaders and stakeholders have the courage and boldness to start the conversation, the persistence to develop new understandings based on shared responsibility, and the willingness to act on those responsibilities, then every urban system can reach the ambitious but attainable goal that each aspires to: *educating at least 98 percent of its students to the highest standards.*

Next Steps

Unifying general and special education involves both organizational and conceptual changes in the ways of "doing the system's work." These changes include instituting some practices that are not common in school districts such as developing a shared practice of inquiry, gathering appropriate data, using that information to make difficult decisions, and then carefully monitoring the impact of those decisions based
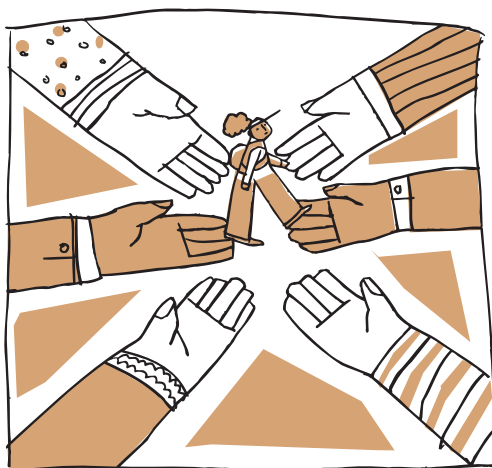
on agreed-upon indicators of change. Those indicators should reflect changes at both the central office and school-based levels.

As a starting point, system leaders can begin to ask some key questions:

What does our data tell us?

• Beyond the percentage of students served through special education, what is the race and gender break-down?

• What is the referral rate? And how do we track referral patterns (by grade level, by presenting issue, etc.)?

• How is this data made public on a regular basis? How and by whom is it discussed and acted upon?

• How is disaggregated subgroup achievement data reviewed and acted upon consistently throughout the system?

How do central office or system leaders perceive their work toward schools?

• How are schools being given appropriate support beyond compliance-driven mandates?

• How are curriculum initiatives and professional development planned for and executed jointly by general and special education drivers?

• To what extent are new reform efforts discussed and "rolled out" in ways that include all the key players around the table from the onset?

How do school-based leaders develop collective responsibility for all students?

• How are literacy and math programs studied and selected for use in the school so that staff capacity is being built broadly and deeply to work with all students?

Investment in building preventive programs should become the norm, rather than the typical response of additional special education services that is required when students have been failed by general education.

• How are inclusive practices planned for, not only among students, but among the adults working in the school?

• How are principals supported in the supervision and evaluation of all staff – both general and special education service providers?

As the work to respond to these initial questions unfolds, lessons will be learned and modifications will be made to truly define what a "unified system" looks like and acts like, with a vigilant eye toward results for students as well as the change in practice for the adults who serve them.

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The Baby College Program: A Parenting Intervention Nested within the Harlem Children's Zone

Beatrice L. Bridglall

A program under way in Harlem helps parents bring up young children who are healthy and ready to learn.

Beatrice L. Bridglall is editor and assistant director at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University, and co-editor of Pedagogical Inquiry and Practice, *published by IUME and the College Board.*

The decline in two-parent families since 1960 has had profound effects on children. This significant change in family structure appears to contribute to child poverty, which is more salient in single-parent families than in two-parent families. Differences in parenting practices and, by extension, parental investment are also associated with family structure and family socio-economic status.

Regardless of family structure, however, the quality of parenting is one of the best predictors of children's emotional and social well-being (Amato 2005). Nonetheless, many single parents find it difficult to function effectively as parents. In comparisons with continuously married parents, single parents are "less emotionally supportive of their children, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, are more inconsistent in dispensing discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children" (p. 83).

By contrast, high-investing parents have some distinguishing characteristics (Barber 2000):
- a warm, trusting relationship with their children;
- minimal use of punishment and scolding and a corresponding reliance on explanation as a method of control;

- the provision of intellectually stimulating activities and toys;
- spending time talking to and listening to children; and
- an emotional commitment between parents and children.

Strengthening the quality of parenting, therefore, could provide significant benefits to children, including reduced poverty, increased social and emotional well-being, and higher academic performance. The field, however, is still struggling with how to
- conceptualize and design interventions that increase parental investment and, by extension, student academic development;
- design research in a rigorous enough way to establish causality and to influence meaningful and timely interventions; and
- distill from the several models that have not been rigorously tested.

One such model is the Baby College program, nested within the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). The HCZ is considered one of the largest social experiments in the United States. The mission of Geoffrey Canada, the president and CEO of the HCZ, is to

change the odds for children and parents in a sixty-block zone in central Harlem, an area with about seven thousand children, more than 60 percent of whom live below the poverty line and three-quarters of whom score below grade level on statewide reading and math assessments. Mr. Canada's strategy is comprehensive, rather than narrowly focused on academic achievement. That is, academic excellence is one of the *outcomes,* while the *mechanisms through which it is achieved* include the nurturance of family stability, family well-being, opportunities for employment, decent and affordable housing, youth development activities for adolescents, and a quality education for children in the sixty-block zone.

This strategy "starts at birth and follows children to college. It meshes those services into an interlocking web and then it drops that web over an entire neighborhood. It operates on the principle that each child will do better if all the children around him are doing better.... The objective is to create a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighborhood just can't slip through" (Tough 2004).

One of the more ambitious efforts in the HCZ is the Baby College program. Baby College is a nine-week series of workshops in which participating parents are divided into groups according to the ages of their children. Available in English, Spanish, and French, these workshops occur at one of the public schools in the HCZ. In these settings, parents learn about the importance of health and immunizations, brain development, discipline, asthma, lead, and safety relative to their children's cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Recent HCZ analyses indicate some success with respect to the practical nature of parenting; homes now have

window guards and other safety equipment, children's immunizations are more on schedule, and a larger proportion of children are enrolled in health care. These analyses, however, assume fidelity between program theory and implementation processes.

To conduct a more rigorous analysis of the work, Canada recently invited the author and a colleague to begin a program of research that includes assessing the efficacy of his interventions, starting with the Baby College program.[1]

As currently conceived, our task is threefold:
- document (through ethnographic study) salient structural components and processes in program implementation;
- determine the theoretical assumptions and expectations that inform this program; and
- determine the relationship of *independent variables* of interest, including

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1 This invitation is noteworthy, since Mr. Canada has not, until recently, allowed any social scientist to conduct research in his organization.

gender; socio-economic status; race/ethnicity; and family stability, well-being, and functioning to *dependent variables* of interest: changes in parental behaviors and attitudes, such as whether parental knowledge of important parenting practices has increased as a function of participation in the intervention, and the educational achievement of children.

This article focuses on the first of these tasks – documentation through ethnographic study.

The Baby College Program

The Baby College program follows a nine-week curriculum of four-hour workshops, held on consecutive Saturdays. Week one orients parents to the goals and expectations of the program; week two covers the importance of immunization; week three exposes parents to how a baby's brain develops; week four ties in prior topics with discipline; week five continues with brain development; week six picks up the theme of discipline; week seven connects prior information with concerns about asthma and lead; week eight covers safety; and week nine concludes with a graduation ceremony.

Some of the assumptions undergirding this program are:

- Parents and expecting parents in the HCZ do not have information on or support for effective early parenting.
- The Baby College program is of sufficient quality and duration to produce certain outcomes.
- Participation in the program can result in knowledge of effective parenting behaviors and skills.
- Relevant changes in parental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior will positively impact families.
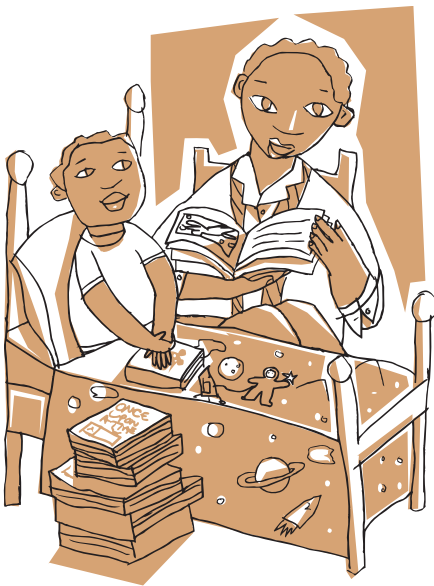
- Appropriate support, stimulation, and nurturance of babies will have a positive effect on their cognitive emotional and social development.
- Children in the HCZ are not entering school ready to learn.

All four-hour workshops were observed and data on the implementation of program themes were gathered. The following discussion describes the general structure of the workshops and focuses on the cognitive and social supports offered via one two-part workshop on brain development.

Breakfast with Parents and Children and Introduction to the Topic

Each workshop begins at 9:30 a.m., when participating parents and their children sit down for breakfast. During this time, the program director reminds parents about the topic of the day and the insights she and her staff hope parents are able to glean and incorporate into their own parenting behaviors. Other HCZ staff make announcements and inform parents of upcoming events.

For example, at one session, a staff member talked about the importance of healthy behaviors such as eating the right foods. He acknowledged that it is not easy to behave in healthy ways but emphasized that adults should realize that children will imitate what adults do and eat, in addition to their worldview, outlook, and manners. He encouraged adults to talk with other HCZ staff and sign up for a range of programs offered on fitness and health.

There were also announcements from the child-care supervisor, who connected the theme of the week – brain development – to the singing, playing, dancing, and talking the child-care workers were engaging in with children in their care. The child-care supervisor then invited a six-year-old child to perform a song. As the child

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sang, this supervisor invited everyone in the cafeteria to participate. At the end of this song, parents were encouraged to interact with their children and to listen carefully to them.

Engaging Parents around the Topic

As breakfast ends, the program director reminds parents that they must be present at each class in order to graduate. Parents are also reminded of important dates, activities, and programs. After breakfast (about 10:15 a.m.), children are provided with age-appropriate child care while their parents adjourn to the auditorium. In the auditorium, parents are again presented with information that is geared to helping them to provide structure, support, stimulation, and nurturance for their children.

During one observation, a staff member talked about the importance of having a library card, knowing the library hours, and actually bringing one's children to the library. This presenter gave out library card applications and emphasized the importance of getting

children to read and interact with each other around books.

After the presentation about library cards, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton and his colleagues took questions from parents. This renowned pediatrician was instrumental in designing the Baby College curriculum and training program staff in child development. He and several of his staff members make at least two visits during the nine-week program cycle.

Before Dr. Brazelton and his colleagues took questions, parents were reassured that all of their questions were legitimate. One parent wanted clarification concerning the difference between Touchpoints (Brazelton's philosophy and theory of child development) and the theories of Piaget, Maslow, and Spock. Dr. Brazelton replied that, in his approach, parents learn from their mistakes, from watching their child, and from the ghosts from their own past.

Dr. Brazelton added that all parents have something crucial to share at each critical stage of development, and that babies learn who their parents are very early. It takes four days for a baby to learn his or her mother's smell, seven days to learn the sound of the mother's voice, and ten days to recognize her face. One of Dr. Brazelton's intentions in exposing parents to how babies' brains work is to enable parents to make the best decisions about how to parent their child.

These conversations and announcements are often followed by a game called Baby College Jeopardy. In this game, the program director and her staff test parents to determine what they have retained. They ask one parent from each group to come to the front of the auditorium. The questions come from the themes emphasized in the previous sessions. Some of the questions for parents include the name of the HCZ's charter school, the location of the library, the name of the consultant who visited and the book the consultant wrote, and the number of immunizations children need to have by age three. There are prizes for right answers. The program director usually ends the sessions in the auditorium by encouraging parents to attend each of the workshops and to make up any missed classes. This session usually ends between 11:00 a.m. and 11:15 a.m.

Seeing How the Topic Relates to Activities with Children

For the next hour and a half (until around 12:30 p.m.), parents meet in smaller groups with their instructors. Each group has three HCZ staff members and ten to fifteen parents. The groups then proceed to what is known as the "Land of Make Believe": the classroom where the child-care workers actively engage children in the workshop themes. For example, the theme of brain development is linked to activities that include measuring, mixing, touching, and feeling. Parents are usually briefed on their children's activities during this time.

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In one session, a staff member asked whether any of the parents had a favorite story to perform at graduation. Since no one volunteered, the staff chose *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. In preparation for acting out the story, the staff handed out to each parent paper fruits with holes. (In the story, a caterpillar eats through fruit each day until it grows big and builds a cocoon.) A small paper caterpillar was passed around and put through the fruit holes as the story was being read. The reading of this story was followed by a distribution of library cards. Parents were encouraged to borrow the book from the library.

Staff then reminded parents to be ready for home visits by outreach workers, who sometimes read to the children when they visit. (Outreach workers also share techniques with parents about how to meaningfully interact with their children, and they monitor whether parents are integrating or incorporating what was taught in class.) Staff ended the session by urging parents to point out and explain things to their children as they are walking down the street.

Following these sessions, parents and their children are invited to have lunch with each other and the staff. After lunch, a raffle is held with gifts to help with parenting.

Learning about the Topic: Brain Development

The emphasis in the first part of this workshop is on the milestones in a baby's brain development. The second part of the workshop integrates this information in a practical way, for instance, creating a book that includes a list of things that make the parent happy or sad. The instructor reminded parents that the things they were choosing were what *they* liked. These choices clearly have implications.

Parents are asked to think of *how their child* will react and *what* the child will react to relative to the book.

As parents worked, the instructor talked about the importance of creating time and space to interact with children around books. Some parents were concerned about making the time when they were so busy juggling work and home life. The instructor urged them to manage their time more effectively. Other parents complained about the amount of time they have to spend with their children. The instructor replied,

> We respect what you're saying. Realistically, we have to make the time to invest in our children. As the child gets older, this becomes increasingly important. We do not expect that you'll do everything we recommend. You have to pick what works for you and your child. The activities you do with your children help them with literacy, language, learning skills, comprehension, and brain development. Their vocabulary increases when you have conversations with them. This is not forced on you. The activities are a window of opportunity. It creates an opportunity to have meaningful conversations with your children. It allows you to know your children on a deeper level.

It appears that the social support offered to parents and their children may act as a buffer against early economic deprivation and certain neighborhood conditions which can lead to reduced functioning.

During this workshop, Dr. Brazelton entered with his team. A question concerning *object permanency* came up. Dr. Brazelton replied,

> Are you interacting around peek-a-boo? Although this game seems simple, it enables the child to develop confidence that his or her parent will come back. It helps with separation anxiety. When a child develops a good sense of object permanence, there is a secure base from which physical development, mental/emotional development, and language development can occur.

Another parent asked about spanking children. Dr. Brazelton was emphatic that spanking is

> a no-no. It's humiliating. Parents have to give children the opportunity to mess up and, through love and encouragement, teach them the right way. Parents should also avoid telling children to shut up. They need to encourage conversations. This can be done by explaining the reasoning behind their decisions rather than simply saying "because I am the mother" or "because I told you so."

Parents need to remember that their children have to learn to survive in different situations. Constantly having conversations with children is crucial for their language development.

Some parents were concerned that giving their children options might backfire. But Dr. Brazelton reassured them that it contributes to brain development to make clear to children that the parent cannot do what the child is asking but can do something else. He emphasized that parents should save saying *no* and real discipline for very important times and situations.

> If parents say *no* too often, it becomes meaningless. If parents *do* have to say *no*, talk about what the child can do instead. Parents have to nurture a sense of self-regulation in their children. This enables children to effectively stop themselves. Parents do have to take the initiative, think about the long-term effect, and realize that they play a critical role in their child's development. This strategy translates into the classroom and children come into the classroom being disciplined about learning.

There was a question concerning the number of languages children can learn. Dr. Brazelton's colleague, Dr. Joshua Sparrow, emphasized that, in the first year of life, babies can and do understand language, and that it is easier to learn a language before age ten. He encouraged parents to read a story in different languages and expose children to the world's diversity.

Dr. Sparrow added that "children want to learn, please, and be social," and suggested that parents make time for play and reading on Saturdays. One of the males in the group suggested that parents could build going to the library into playtime with their children. Dr. Brazelton and HCZ staff applauded his interest and encouraged the parents to do so early and often. They also

emphasized that children who cannot read well do not do well in school.

After Dr. Brazelton and his colleagues left to visit another group of parents, the instructor reinforced some of the points he made and gave parents homework: to read often with their child and come in with a book their child was fascinated with. They were to come in prepared to share what they did with their child. For example, did they point out and name certain shapes, signs, and/or letters to their children?

A Crucial Debate

Although this initial observational data is not enough to make any definitive inferences, it appears that this intervention's impact, if any, may be related to the careful integration of current research on neuroscience, human development, the applied science of early childhood, and the science and practice of parenting with participating parents' cultural values and social patterns. It also appears that the social support offered to parents and their children may act as a buffer against early economic deprivation and certain neighborhood conditions which can lead to reduced functioning, for both parents and children, that can continue into the children's adolescence and young adulthood (Carnegie Corporation 1994).

Clearly, improving outcomes for children and families in areas such as Harlem is not an easy task. Research on this and other treatments within the HCZ may enable us to answer questions about how we care for and protect our most vulnerable children and their families.

This debate is particularly important because these questions challenge many of society's most dominant values such as personal responsibility, individual self-reliance, and limited governmental involvement in our lives. Geoffrey Canada's work appears not to be focused on *castigating* parents or their communities. Rather, it appears to provoke, through its very comprehensiveness, both local and national dialogues concerning the creation and sustenance of opportunities to develop our underserved and underrepresented youth.

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To Be Young, Gifted, Emotionally Challenged, and Black: A Principal's Role in Developing a Culturally Responsive Context

Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson

The story of a gifted African American boy named Elijah illustrates the role that principals can and should play to address the needs of underserved youths in a way that builds on their cultural assets and promotes equity.

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The performance curtain raised by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has forced our nation's public schools to confront whether, in fact, "all" really means *all* in the educational attainment of the nation's children and youth. A mandate to disaggregate the data to show how specific groups of children are progressing has highlighted in significant ways the systemic lack of academic success among traditionally underserved pupils, particularly African American learners.

Principals, as instructional leaders, are key actors in championing the commitment to reverse persistent trends of academic failure among these children and youth. Yet the eradication of the achievement gap that separates African American learners from their White peers continues to progress at a very slow pace because few principals understand their role in facilitating the effective education of this dynamic group of children and youth.

The performance data are well known and stark. African American youth are underrepresented in the proficient and advanced levels of academic achievement (NAEP 2005), and overrepresented in discipline, suspension, expulsion, special education referral and placement, and adjudicated youth rates (Harry & Klingner 2005; Skiba et al. 2005; Townsend 2000; Webb-Johnson 2003). Further, they are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and services (Harris et al. 2004). When they are unsuccessful in the general education environment, they are disproportionately referred to and then designated to receive special education services. Unfortunately, once African American learners receive special education services, their academic progress often persists in being dismal.

Many principals are perplexed as to how to best assist teachers in meeting the academic and behavioral manifestations of this diverse group of learners. Often, principals lack a cultural context to authentically address and impact the challenge. This article will address the role of principals as instructional leaders who engage in relationship building to better understand the academic plight of African American children and youth; build their own knowledge and skill base in

understanding the dimensions of African American culture; and support teachers to effectively teach African American children and youth from a "strength" perspective rather than a "deficit" perspective. Finally, an imperative for culturally responsive instructional leadership that addresses the equity and social justice needed to meet the academic needs of African American learners is emphasized.

Relationship Building and African American Families

To illustrate the dilemmas facing African American learners and their teachers and principals, meet Elijah.

Elijah is young, gifted, emotionally challenged, and Black... and that is a fact. He has been in four different schools in three different school districts over the past two years.

From the time he was an infant, his parents and members of his extended family noted something special about his temperament, his countenance, and his persistence. He was and is affirmed on a daily basis not just for his physical beauty, but also for his critical thinking and extraordinary skill development. He has spent significant amounts of time in the company of adults. By the time he entered school at age five, he demonstrated great comfort in challenging adults when he perceived injustice and often rebelled when his perspectives were not valued.

Specialists interpreted his behavior as symptoms of hyperactivity, and he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) by the time he was six. He was placed on a special education plan in first grade and modifications were implemented to assist him in remaining on task. He met and/or exceeded all academic goals and tasks and it was clear to the school that behavioral interventions assisted him in the process.

However, Elijah had difficulty remaining on task and in developing close relationships with adults and peers. Anecdotal records on his behavior were extensive by the end of his second-grade year. The school believed he should be referred for placement in a self-contained special education classroom for children with behavioral disorders. A comprehensive battery of medical and academic assessments documented that Elijah

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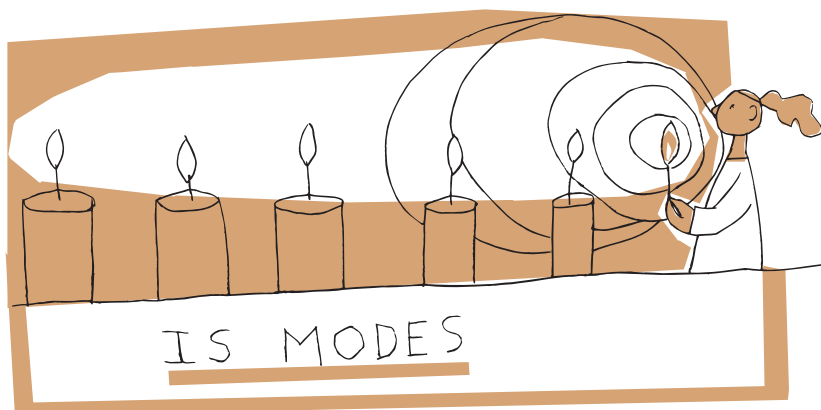
experienced ADHD and some behavioral issues related to his parents' recent divorce and to his being gifted. His mother was immediately against a placement in a self-contained classroom.

Because the principal and teachers disagreed with Elijah's mother, they assured her they would keep copious records on his behavior. His second-grade teacher was very perplexed, however. She never knew what to do to support his behavior or his academic needs. Everyone was relieved when the school year ended. By the time Elijah entered third grade, his behavioral challenges escalated. Teachers noted his continued resistance to adult intervention. His typical response was, "It is not my fault my teachers don't know what they are talking about."

His mother began to note a decline in his enthusiasm for school. Elijah told her he had no friends in school because the teachers always told peers not to play with him because of his behavior. By midyear, he was physically removed from class because he refused to apologize for correcting the teacher. Elijah reported to the principal and his mother

that two adults choked him during the removal from class; the adults denied the charge. The principal defended his teachers. He believed Elijah's behavior was out of control.

Elijah's mother demanded that he be moved to another school and placed in a classroom with an African American or male teacher. Reluctantly, the school complied with the request and Elijah was placed in another school in the district. The new principal was resistant to accepting Elijah because of his "record." But Elijah's new teacher, an African American woman, was happy to accept him into her classroom. She was the only African American teacher in the school. She was known for her patience and excellent teaching, especially with learners who were gifted and talented.

Elijah flourished in Mrs. Baylor's class. She never experienced any behavioral difficulties from him during class. In fact, her only challenge was assisting Elijah in developing patience when he believed his peers were reacting too slowly in communal group activities. He often decided he should just do everything when his peers were having difficulty keeping up.

However, this challenge did not faze Mrs. Baylor. She was quite used to her students' zeal for learning and took their lack of patience as opportunities for enriched teaching and learning. Whenever Elijah challenged her actions as a teacher, she took time to explore his feelings and perceptions. She never ridiculed him for his beliefs and assertions; instead, she often challenged him to offer his own solutions. She was excited about having another African American student in her classroom. She often commented on the fact that it had been a long time since she had interacted with a student who was so bright and inquisitive.
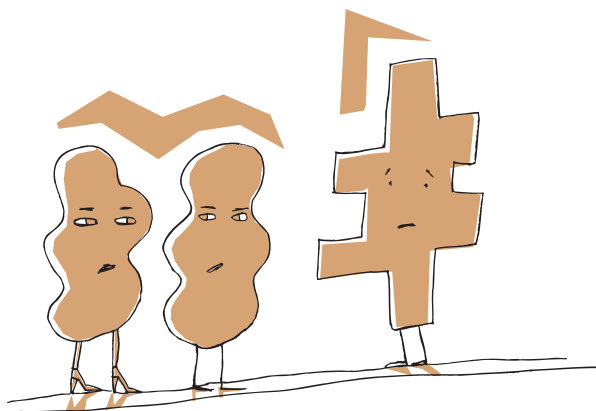
Several days before the state-mandated academic assessment, Elijah announced to Mrs. Baylor and his mother that he was going to fail the state assessment so he could return to Mrs. Baylor's class for another year in third grade. Mrs. Baylor probed to understand why he would chose not to do his best on the exam. When she realized that he wanted to remain with her because he was "tired of always having to fight with other teachers to learn," she let him know she understood, but challenged him to come up with another solution to his dilemma. Mrs. Baylor also shared that she and her family would be moving to another city. She assured him that she loved him and trusted he would make the best decision for his future. While he was saddened by this news, he reluctantly decided to do his best. He was successful in his first attempt on the third-grade state assessment. His missed earning an exemplary rating by two points in reading and five points in math.

His mother decided that she would not return to this particular urban/suburban school district. There were no African American fourth-grade teachers in the district, and she was tired of the battles. She moved to a larger urban area. She carefully chose the second school district because of Elijah's need for gifted intervention and behavioral support. Unfortunately, the first five months of fourth grade were horrendous. Five special education team meetings were held, with a consistent recommendation to place Elijah in a self-contained classroom. While he experienced few academic challenges, he was suspended on several occasions for altercations

> Elijah's new teacher, an African American woman, was happy to accept him into her classroom. Elijah flourished in Mrs. Baylor's class. She never experienced any behavioral difficulties from him.

with adults and inappropriate playground behavior. In fact, he received a police citation for kicking a peer while playing during recess.

Elijah's mother perceived the principal in this school as hostile. He was persistent in his efforts to persuade her to agree to a self-contained placement. He often cited his role to protect "all" children as justification for his zero-tolerance stance with Elijah. He was resistant to any discussion on culturally responsive interventions with Elijah.

By January, Elijah's mother transferred him to a predominantly African American school district, also in the same urban area. This was a reluctant choice on her part because she was not happy with the academic outcomes of the district. After one month in the third school district, she told me:

> At least I don't have to worry about how he is treated. He gets into altercations every day, but he handles it and the school has never called me about a problem with his behavior or his academics. He gets to be a little boy. I think his academics are suffering because they don't expect enough, but I don't have to fight every day!

The four principals had little understanding about dimensions of African American culture and how they might impact the teaching and learning of African American learners. Their leadership significantly impacted the willingness of teachers to address Elijah's needs.

Elijah scored *exemplary* in both reading and math on his fourth-grade state assessment, but he received no gifted services during the last four months of his fourth-grade year.

Elijah's story shows the important role principals play – and how damaging a lack of culturally responsive instructional leadership can be. Three of the four principals demonstrated little understanding of the importance of building a meaningful relationship with Elijah and his mother. They called her often, but only to complain about his behavior. She did not feel valued in any of those settings. Assertions on the mother's part to address her son's needs as an African American child were ignored and deemed unimportant by these principals. They were unwavering in their belief that Elijah needed special education services in a separate setting. Each of these principals decided they knew what was best for Elijah.

Despite the principals' indifference to Elijah's needs as an African American youth, the second and third schools Elijah attended did hold workshops and discussions for teachers to assist the principals and all of Elijah's teachers in understanding Elijah first as an African American child, then as one who experienced emotional challenges and as a child who was gifted. District administrators, at the insistence of Elijah's mother, mandated the workshops and discussions.

These interventions were met with resistance. The principals at the first three schools did not attend the workshops. In fact, the principal from the first school also decided not to send any of his teachers because Elijah no longer attended the school. The principal at the third school participated in the discussions but always reverted to a defense mechanism, noting that he treated all of his students the same and it was clear that Elijah had to change his behavior.

Elijah's mother chose to share very little information with the fourth principal and, as a result, had little interaction with this leader because Elijah was not experiencing behavioral challenges that warranted his intervention. Each of the four principals, however, noted that they had little understanding about dimensions of African American culture and how they might impact the teaching and learning of African American learners. Their leadership significantly impacted the willingness of teachers to address Elijah's needs academically, behaviorally, and culturally.

Understanding Dimensions of African American Culture

If principals are to serve as culturally responsive instructional leaders who advocate for the effective education of African American youth, they must

understand the dimensions of African American culture. The presence of people of African descent in this country has been inundated with controversy. There has been a systemic denial of the presence of an African American culture, especially as it relates to adaptations from West African culture and the impact it has on present-day interactions of individuals from the African American community (Nobles 1980).

There is evidence that many "ways of knowing" within the African American community are extensions of African traditions, customs, and, most important, adaptations necessary as the result of recovery from systemic differential treatment in a race-conscious American society. Boykin (1983) identified nine dimensions of African American culture that have assisted psychologists and educators in better understanding patterns of behavior often noted in African American communities and, ultimately, among many African American children. Spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, and social time perspectives are epistemologies that help characterize culturally socialized behavior in many African American communities.

Elijah was adept at perceiving social injustice and often expressed his belief that the differential treatment he received was due to his status as an African American male child (spirituality) in all of his classes except Mrs. Baylor's. He sought to create and become a part of harmonious environments in school and was often forced to ignore his need and desire for meaningful relationships with adults and peers (harmony). His movement and activity level in school were perceived as problematic. Teachers spent more time telling him to sit down and "behave" than they did directing that energy and activity level in meaningful and productive ways (movement, verve).

How teachers and peers feel about him is very important, however; over the past two years he has developed defense mechanisms to pretend that he does not care about people in school, yet he has yearned for friendship and acceptance (affect). He loves working with others, especially in problem-solving contexts where a solution is needed. He does not respond well to token economy systems that ask him to earn points or rewards for appropriate behavior. He loves learning for the sake of learning and helping others (communalism).

He has found himself in settings demanding that he protect his integrity as a person. Teachers had difficulty embracing and understanding that it was important to him to complete activities in his own way (expressive
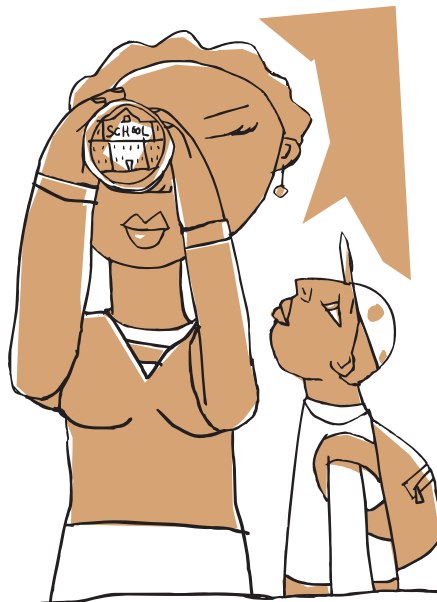
> A culturally responsive context for leadership and instruction is imperative if public schools intend to exercise the will necessary to construct improved and high academic outcomes for African American learners.

individualism) and in his own time (social time perspective). Principals and their teachers benefit from the use of these dimensions when they are translated into teaching modes and strategies that embrace the integrity and strengths brought to school by African American learners like Elijah, regardless of their social/economic status or family condition (Boykin 2002).

A. Wade Boykin (personal communication, February 2003) asserted, "Many aspects of the 'ways' African American learners come to know who they are and how they learn best, just 'is' the way that it is." He recommends that principals and teachers respect the integrity and strengths of African American learners. Integrity-Strength (IS) models based on Boykin's (1983) nine dimensions have been developed to assist instructional leaders and their teachers in better understanding the behavior and the integrity necessary to support academic development among African American learners.

A Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership Imperative

A culturally responsive context for leadership and instruction is imperative if public schools intend to exercise the will necessary to construct improved and high academic outcomes for African American learners (Perry, Steele & Hilliard 2003). Principals are key in eradicating the current patterns supporting incomplete school success and academic failure.

The challenge is particularly acute when these learners are perceived as having disabilities. In Elijah's case, the perception was probably correct, although the remedy proposed was inappropriate. However, there are perhaps thousands of African American children and youth who have been improperly labeled and mandated to receive special services, many of which do not help them academically. Many may be developing defense mechanisms similar to Elijah's. African American children and youth are often resistant to a denial of their integrity and their strengths as learners (Anderson & Webb-Johnson 1995).

Principals must be vigilant in ensuring that referrals and placement decisions for special education are an absolutely last resort in their buildings. The first resort is relationship building. When principals are equipped with knowledge and skills grounded in the importance of relationship building when engaging African American families and children, the dimensions of African American culture, and meaningful support for teachers who act as culturally responsive change agents, public schools will be better able to construct meaningful and improved academic outcomes for African American learners.

This imperative is non-negotiable. It does indeed take an entire village to educate African American children and youth, but instructional leaders must first reconstruct the educational village, because the educational village is presently ineffective. African American children and youth are worthy of the best the system has to offer. Without culturally responsive instructional leaders, it will be impossible to meet the challenge of their worth. Elijah is young, gifted, emotionally challenged, and Black; that is a fact. We must demand that principals honor his worth and ensure that teachers teach to his brilliance and promise in general and special education environments.

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Serving African American Learners: Literacy as Access

Dwight C. Watson

A pedagogical approach can prepare teachers to help African American students learn the crucial literacy skills they need to gain access to the power, privilege, and prestige enjoyed by the dominant culture.

Here is the conundrum. African American learners are not performing as well as White learners or learners from other ethnic groups on various reading indicators. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that in 2005, at both grades 4 and 8, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students scored higher, on average, than Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native students scored higher, on average, than Black students (NAEP 2005). Are there proven methods that would narrow the reading gap between African American learners and their White counterparts?

As an African American educator, I am often asked to generate the magic elixir that would remedy the reading concerns of African American learners. Through conducting observations, discussing literacy practices with teachers, and modeling lessons in urban classrooms, I have discovered there are no best practices for African American learners. What is best for African American learners is what is best for all learners.

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The practices may be the same, but how they are delivered and the teachers' dispositions play a role in how successful these practices are for African American learners.

This article showcases why it is important to position literacy proficiency and academic attainment as an *access to power*. This positioning will be revealed as I unfold my own story and describe the catalysts for my academic success. This article also discusses a literacy-modeling event that I conducted with White teachers who worked with primarily African American students. I explain the strategies and discuss the implementation process, which I call Cycles of Assistance. The final sections of the article will focus on pre-service teachers and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need in order to effectively work with African American learners.

Literacy as Access to Power

Lisa Delpit (1996), in her landmark book *Other People's Children,* stated it best when she said that we must teach children the practical navigational skills that will provide them access to power. Literacy is the ability to read, write,

speak, listen, think, and view. These fundamental skills are essential for the success of all learners, but especially so for the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Teachers of African American children should recognize that these learners need literacy skills so that they can have access to the power, privileges, and prestige that is automatically afforded the dominant culture.

In order to operate from a vantage point of empowering learners, teachers must first recognize that inequities exist across racial lines and that historical oppression has played a major role in the academic development of African American learners.

In my urban teaching classes with graduate and pre-service teachers, I tell my own story as an allegory of how teachers were able to penetrate my veneer of oppression in order to tap into my potential and urge me toward success. My teachers realized that, in order to teach me, they must first know me.

Reflections of an African American Literacy Learner

I grew up with modest means in an African American family in the South. I attended segregated schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even though *Brown v. Board of Education* supposedly outlawed the practices of separate but equal schools in 1954. My first exposure to Whites in schools was when White teachers were hired to teach the all-Black student body.

I remember having my first White teacher in the fourth grade. The most vivid memory of this experience was when this teacher took us on a field trip to a performance of a live theater production of *My Fair Lady*. This was

the first time that any of us were exposed to live theater outside of passion plays in church and our first realization that there were other entertainment activities outside our immediate community.

Probably unbeknownst to this teacher, she had provided us an avenue of access. We were allowed to participate in an endeavor that was viewed as something that only White people could do. In fact, we were very fearful, as were our parents, about whether or not we would even be accepted at the theater. This incident shaped my listening and viewing literacy skills, as well as my lifelong love for theater.

When I went to seventh grade, I was bussed from my neighborhood Black school across the railroad tracks[1] to the middle school in the White neighborhood. Despite the supposed integration of the school, all the Black students were in *basic* language arts and mathematics classrooms.

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1 The railroad tracks in most Southern towns were physical lines of demarcation that separated Black and White neighborhoods.
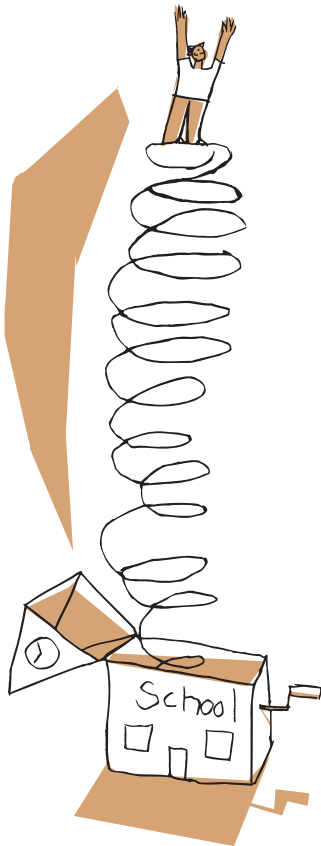
I floundered throughout seventh grade in courses that were not academically challenging. My saving grace was a Black teacher[2] who taught me language arts. She recognized my boredom with the material and worked with the guidance counselor to change my courses so that I could take *average* mathematics and science classes and *honors* language arts and social studies classes.

In honors classes, the teachers' dispositions were different. They expected you to know something and held you accountable for your academic success. They taught the power of knowledge and made you realize that knowledge was accessible and that knowledge was capital. With the knowledge you accrued, you could propel your life beyond your present station. This message was consistent with that of the elders in the Black community, who would state that if the young people wanted to "rise up out of this place, an education could give you wings." You could fly to uncharted destinations when equipped with an education. In essence, an education gave you access to power.

My life experience serves as the impetus for much of the work that I do. I want the pre-service and in-service teachers with whom I work to benefit from my wisdom when it comes to having the dispositional beliefs, attitudes, and values toward African American learners as well as the instructional skill sets that will, indeed, showcase literacy as a means to an end. To promote this initiative, I am constantly modeling literacy practices that serve African American learners.

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2 I noted the race of this teacher because I wanted to be intentional that my primary access experiences were due to a White and a Black teacher. The premise here is that the awareness of untapped potential crosses color lines.

Inside the Urban Classroom: Cycle of Assistance

After seven years in the academy as a professor of literacy development, I decided to take a sabbatical and return to my first love, classroom teaching. I was hired as a literacy coach in an urban elementary school with a population of 85 percent African American students and 15 percent Hmong students. I was responsible for modeling authentic strategies to teachers and then observing the teachers replicating these practices. I called this type of modeling Cycle of Assistance (Watson 2000). The Cycle of Assistance consisted of six phases – observing, planning, modeling, debriefing, replicating, and reviewing (see Figure 1).

The Cycle of Assistance is a model of professional development that enables teachers to perfect their literacy instructional proficiency in the confines of their own classroom. The teachers are participants in their own learning. The learning is relevant and authentic and the teachers shape the effectiveness of the instruction through observation and feedback.

This type of professional development was ideal for the school in which I did my sabbatical because many of the teachers were skeptical of workshops based on instructional techniques that were not demonstrated on their population of students. By showing the teachers that these techniques could indeed work with diverse learners, they were more apt to attempt them themselves.

It was not enough for me to simply model the strategy. I had to be assured that the teachers could do it also. If I had not let them try their hand at the strategy, they could have dismissed the strategy's success as due to my being an African American male who had cultural affinity with most of the students and that this affinity was the reason for the success, not the deliberateness of the instructional delivery.

Culturally Congruent Best Practices: A Modeling Event

When I modeled literacy practices in a teacher's classroom, I was always cognizant of the diversity of the students. I am intentional about creating a modeling event that will meet the academic and cultural needs of the students. As I began a Cycle of Assistance with one sixth-grade teacher, I noticed that some of the students would frequently use the word *nigga* as a term of endearment toward other students in the classroom. I noticed also that some of the students, as well as the teacher, seemed to be visibly upset with the use of the word, but did not know how to address the students who were using the word.

Phase 1: Observe	The coach observes the teacher to investigate classroom dynamics, student behaviors, and rituals and routines.
Phase 2: Plan	The coach and teacher plan a lesson based on the teacher's literacy professional development needs.
Phase 3: Model	The coach models the literacy strategy. The teacher observes and takes notes.
Phase 4: Debrief	The coach and the teacher discuss the modeled strategy.
Phase 5: Replicate	The teacher implements the strategy that was modeled.
Phase 6: Review	The teacher and coach discuss the instruction.

Figure 1: Cycle of Assistance

Literacy is a tool of access – access to knowledge, understanding, and opportunity. We used a literacy strategy to demystify an issue that was causing disharmony in the classroom.

In my pre-service program, we have rich discussions about the use of the n-word and how to approach students in the classroom who are using language that may make others uncomfortable (Watson 2001). During our planning session, I spoke to the teacher about what I observed and was given the green light to address this issue while, at the same time, teaching a literacy strategy.

I chose the literacy strategy called *story impression* (Vacca & Vacca 2005). The literacy element of this strategy is to get students to write initial impressions about a passage before reading the passage and then to make comparisons with what was initially written and what was read. The culturally congruent purpose of using this strategy was to give the students an opportunity to express their understanding of the n-word and to have a richer discussion about content and context as we deconstructed the historical and contemporary usage of the word.

To conduct the story impression, students wrote an initial impression using the words as listed. The students were given the following words and phrases: *White people, derogatory, in the past, nigger, Black people, term of endearment, contemporary times, nigga* or *niggah*.

An example of one student's impression was:

> White people use the word *nigger* as a hateful, derogatory expression to offend or hurt Black people. This happened in the past. White people do not openly use this word today; however, Black people do use the word. Black people use the word as a friendly greeting or term of endearment. A Black person may greet another Black person with the expression, "Hey, nigga! What's up?"

Once the impressions were written, the students shared their paragraphs with the class. This strategy was used as a pre-reading strategy. The students then read a newspaper article that discussed the use of the n-word in the animated television series *The Boondocks*. They compared their impressions with those written in the article. We ended the session by listening to some popular music that used the n-word. We wrote the phrases in which the n-word was used and we deconstructed the usage of the word as we focused on the content and context.

When the session ended, it was agreed that the students who were using the word were using it in a positive way but that the classroom was not the best context for its use. The students realized that, even though it may empower the speaker and the greeting recipient, the word might offend others in the

class, especially those of a race other than Black, because their perception of the n-word was still rooted in its historical, derogatory usage.

This is just one example of how literacy is a tool of access – access to knowledge, understanding, and opportunity. We used a literacy strategy to demystify an issue that was causing disharmony in the classroom. The African American learners understood the power of language and how it could be used to cause harm. They also understood that by using the word as a term of endearment, they were desensitizing the word and making it their own. The learners in this class gained knowledge about the history of the word; they understood that words may have different meanings for different people based on the content and context; and they recognized that this literacy session gave them an opportunity to problem-solve an issue that was relevant to their lives.

Reflective Practice in an Urban Context

How can we prepare pre-service teachers to teach students whose race, culture, and class often differ from their own? Teacher preparation should impact knowledge, dispositions, and skills for the redistribution of power (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994). In order to combat feelings of *dis-ease,* I worked to create instructional practices that are socio-culturally conscious, affirming of culturally diverse backgrounds, constructivist, and culturally responsive (Villegas & Lucas 2002).

Over the years, I found that two important practices to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of how to best teach *literacy as access* to African American learners were to model culturally congruent practices that the pre-service teachers could replicate in the classroom and to place them in urban pre-K–12 arenas so they could have a contextualized experience.

In order to effectively model culturally congruent practices, I chose the following implementation guidelines:

- Clearly define the practice and state its purpose.
- Appropriately model the practice.
- Provide sufficient guided practice through simulations and discussion.
- Provide a contextualized experience so the practice can be applied.

For example, in an elementary literacy development class, I discussed the merits of multicultural literature. I *clearly defined* how students needed "window" and "mirror" opportunities. Students needed to see themselves reflected in the books that were housed in the classroom library (mirror) as well

I model best practices with in-service teachers so that they, too, can become culturally competent and serve their African American learners.

teaching in urban school placements. These contextualized experiences were the pre-service teachers' link between the theory and practice.

Developing Effective, Culturally Competent Teachers

My professional journey has landed me in a place where I can serve African American learners and give them the literacy tool of access. Culturally competent teachers in the segregated South taught me the importance of literacy during my formative elementary years. Currently, as a literacy-development professor, I model best practices with in-service teachers so that they, too, can become culturally competent and serve their African American learners with authentic and relevant instruction. These practices are also taught to my pre-service teachers as they prepare themselves for the reality of the urban classroom.

In summary, it indeed takes a whole village to teach and reach a child. I encourage other teacher educators to replicate the practices outlined in this article and to use them concurrently with course readings and urban clinical placements in order to move in-service and pre-service teachers from foreclosed thoughts to cultural competency.

What I modeled in my college courses and as literacy coach in the field was the type of teaching I wanted current practicing and pre-service teachers to transfer to instruction. I found that if these teachers had opportunities to socially negotiate their thinking in safe, caring, nurturing, responsive environments, then they could develop into effective teachers who could build bridges and scaffold learning opportunities to meet the literacy needs of African American learners.

as have access to books that represented cultures different from their own (window). I then *modeled* the windows-and-mirrors concept by sharing various works of children's literature from multicultural perspectives. The pre-service teachers were provided *guided practice* by selecting various books that represented different cultures, creating an annotated bibliography, and writing literacy extensions for each book. They were given a *contextual experience* by selecting a few of the books from their bibliographies and reading them to classes of diverse elementary students to practice reading-aloud techniques and literacy extensions.

Besides the contextualized experience as a component of the modeled sequence, I placed the pre-service teachers in urban environments for field experiences that were co-requisites for my literacy course. I matched the pre-service teachers with those in-service teachers who were exemplary models of culturally congruent practices. I wanted the pre-service teachers to have a scaffold experience moving from initial observations to tutoring to microteaching and, eventually, fulfilling the capstone experience of student

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Changing the Landscape of Opportunity for Vulnerable Youth

Lucretia Murphy

A national effort now being implemented in five cities demonstrates ways to provide alternative pathways for students who are struggling or who have left school.

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It doesn't take much to lose footing on a slippery slope.

Dionne lives, as she describes it, "in the ghetto" and attends what she calls a "ghetto school." There were "more kids in the hall than in the class." When she started high school, Dionne was one of the students in the class. By her sophomore year, she switched sides – "hanging out with my friends," first in the halls, then at home. She never dropped out; she said she just "stopped going to school." She returned for a few days, then stayed out because she knew she "was gonna fail anyway."

After a semester out of school, hanging out lost its allure. Her friends decided to return to school – an alternative school. Dionne joined them. "I remembered a goal I set myself: to be the first woman in my family to graduate from high school without having a baby." Driven by this goal, Dionne committed herself to the school's extended-day schedule, required after-school homework hours, and an internship. She didn't always like it, but the "teachers worked as hard as I did to get me to graduate." She graduated from high school and enrolled in college.

This pathway to a high school credential – slipping in and out of school – is not an uncommon story in high-poverty minority communities where youth who graduate from high school on time beat the odds. But the faces missing from high school graduations across the country are not all Black and Brown, and the high schools losing youth are not all in the inner city. Approximately 30 percent of youth, nationally, do not graduate in the standard number of years (Greene 2001), many because of interruptions in their education. Across the country, there are a lot of Dionnes.

Like Dionne, many youth we consider to be dropouts do not label themselves that way; they have just "stopped going to school." Whatever their reason for leaving high school, they have not given up on their education. According to a recent Jobs for the Future report (Almeida, Johnson & Steinberg 2006), close to 60 percent of students who leave high school eventually earn a high school credential, mostly GEDs.

Unfortunately, this persistence does not pay long-term dividends for most of the youth. The pathways they follow

to earning a high school credential do not adequately prepare them for the twenty-first-century economy. A GED is often not sufficient to secure a well-paying job. And only 10 percent of dropouts who earn a secondary credential and enroll in college obtain a degree. The challenge, then, is for communities to develop an education system that *makes good on the promise* of educational opportunity for *all* youth. (Almeida, Johnson & Steinberg 2006)

Admittedly, this is a tall order. High-quality education has, traditionally, not been equally accessible to all youth. And in this era of accountability, the stakes are high. Districts must decrease the numbers of youth dropping out of school while, at the same time, increasing the levels of achievement for all youth. States and communities are beginning to address this *dual agenda* through reform efforts that focus on improving the quality – and quantity – of learning options for youth who leave high school, while heightening the standard of quality in high school education.

Clearly, changing the landscape of educational opportunity is a difficult and important challenge for K–12 reform. This is not, however, the work of districts alone. The agencies, organizations, and alternative schools and programs forming the fragile safety net for the youth who stop going to school should be collaborators in reforms to improve the education outcomes for their charges. A national initiative currently under way in five cities – the Strategic Assessment Initiative – shows the potential power of such cross-sector reform.

Launched in January 2005 and funded through a co-investment by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and

The work in Boston; New York; Philadelphia; Portland, Oregon; and San Jose – demonstrates how cross-system collaboration can advance reforms to improve opportunities and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth.

the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the initiative enables a small number of cities that had already begun to address the educational and social needs of the struggling students and dropouts in their communities to become more strategic and systemic in their approach to reform. Jobs for the Future serves as the national intermediary for the initiative.

The work in the five participating cities – Boston; New York; Philadelphia; Portland, Oregon; and San Jose – demonstrates how cross-system collaboration can advance reforms to improve opportunities and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth. Even though these communities differ in context and strategies for reform, each has gained significant traction on this reform agenda by anchoring the work to a common framework emphasizing the strategic use of data, investment in quality learning options, the identification and promotion of policies supporting reform, and the mobilization of key stakeholders to build public will and commitment to improving opportunities for vulnerable youth. As an educator in one site articulated, the framework was both coherent and adaptable enough to allow the initiative to be a "place of convergence for a lot of issues."

Lessons about Systemic Reform

While the work on the ground in these communities continues to deepen and evolve, early lessons have emerged. These lessons are not meant as a blueprint for success, but as instructive signposts for communities ready to advance a systemic reform agenda on behalf of the youth often hidden from view.

The prominence of high school reform presents an opportunity to bring visibility and new attention to struggling students and out-of-school youth.

With all eyes on high schools, there is a moment of opportunity to shine the spotlight on the educational needs of struggling students and out-of-school youth. Strategic use of data is a powerful tool for making the needs of this often invisible and silenced population of young people visible and pressing for district and community leaders. To make the case for action, the data has to be compelling and credible; getting the data "right" can be challenging.

The work in Boston exemplifies the potential power of data to generate attention and action on behalf of out-of-school youth. Led by the Boston Private Industry Council, the Youth Transitions partnership in Boston

collaborated with researchers from the Center for Labor Market Studies (CLMS) to make visible the scope of the problem and the consequences experienced by dropouts in the community. CLMS analyzed state department of education and U.S. census data to reveal the numbers of youth leaving high school each year without a diploma (1,200–1,600) and the numbers of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in the population without a high school diploma or a GED (approximately 8,000).

The report, *"Too Big to Be Seen"* (Boston Youth Transitions Task Force 2006) was presented to the Boston School Committee and had a galvanizing effect on the members. They agreed that the numbers were too high and the consequences too grave not to take action on this issue. The school committee formed the Dropout Task Force, which included district and non-district partners, that will "own the problem" of dropouts, using data to guide prevention and early-intervention strategies in the district.

**District "insiders" can expand high school reform to make the educational needs of vulnerable youth central to the work of the district.** Even recognizing that all youth-serving systems bear responsibility for the educational opportunity and outcomes of youth, leaders have found that making major inroads on the dropout problem is not possible without district attention to this population of youth. New York and Portland illustrate what is possible when district "insiders" place struggling students and out-of-school youth at the center of the high school reform agenda.

New York's experience demonstrates the potential for even the largest of districts to reframe existing reform

to embed strategies and options for struggling students and dropouts. An analysis of district data led by the Multiple Pathways to Graduation Office of the New York City Department of Education revealed that 68,000 of approximately 300,000 high school youth were over-age for grade and significantly behind in credits; the majority of these students were not graduating.

The findings from this analysis shaped investments and new programming models in concert with key non-district partners to develop and support a system addressing both dropout prevention and recovery to offer multiple pathways to graduation. A population of youth once marginalized – some even argued the population was "pushed out" of high school and the benefits of high school reform – has moved to the center of district reform efforts.

Portland's superintendent, Vicki Phillips, made a commitment to create multiple pathways to a high school diploma to ensure that all students
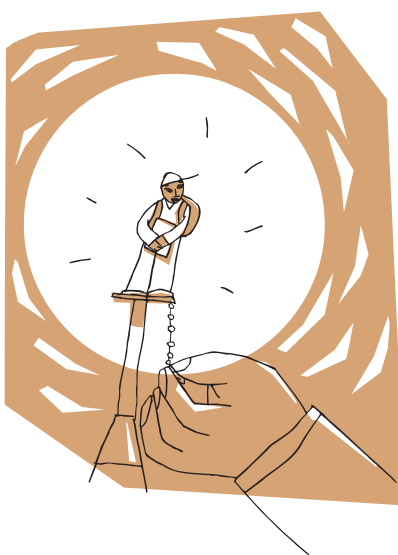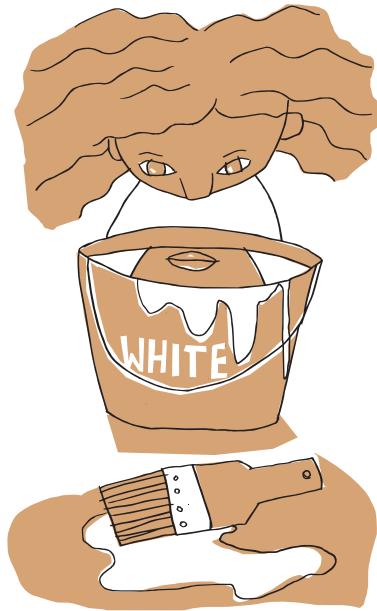
would graduate from high school ready for college and work. To support this vision, she placed the Office of Education Options within a newly staffed-up Office of Secondary Education, bringing together key secondary reform leaders able to coordinate efforts of the district, community-based organizations, and other alternative education providers on behalf of vulnerable youth.

As a result of this organization, the community-based alternative programs are now part of the high school reform career pathways and have a dedicated team of special educators. The district also allocated additional start-up dollars to expand alternative programming as part of a portfolio of high school options. The allocation of district dollars to support alternative programming allowed the Portland Schools Foundation, district partner and leader of the Connected by 25 Initiative, to leverage additional philanthropic support, further increasing the supply of educational options for out-of-school youth.

Outsiders can be a catalyst for district action to address concerns for dropouts.
For many years, the prevalent view has been that dropping out is confined to a small group of young people: poor, Black, and Brown youth. Given that view, it has often fallen to community organizations and educators outside the district to champion the cause of equity and educational opportunities. Having toiled in the shadows to educate vulnerable youth, "outsiders" are now positioned for the limelight as districts grapple with the challenge of serving these youth.

In San Jose, People Acting in Community Together, a key member of the city's Alternative Education Collaborative (AEC), led community organizing and engagement that proved to be a powerful outsiders' strategy: building demand for quality options to serve the youth most often left behind and securing commitments from districts and the county to increase the availability of such options. Other partners coordinated a strategic "support" campaign – developing high-quality learning options. Community-based organizations with long histories of working with high-risk youth stepped in to bridge the gap in starting schools and expanding programming to support efforts to meet the education needs of struggling youth.

These new schools integrate innovative youth development strategies with curriculum that is aligned with the state's standards, but particularly adapted to the socio-cultural, linguistic, developmental, and academic needs and assets of Hispanic youth, the group

most directly affected by the dropout crisis. Through the work of the AEC, emerging best practices in these schools, including the integration of rigorous academics and youth development activities, as well as culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, are included in professional development for schools in partnering districts.

Collaboration is vital to create and support innovative educational options for struggling students and out-of-school youth.
The needs of young people who cycle in and out of school vary, but consistently they need more than "reading, writing, and arithmetic" to achieve their educational potential. The success of new options for these youth depends on achieving the appropriate balance of academic press and intensive support in these schools. One key strategy for accomplishing this balance is through a partnership of schools and community-based organizations.

Philadephia's Youth Transitions Collaborative builds on years of successful collaboration among key partners through the Philadelphia Youth Council. Coming together at a common table focused on out-of-school youth, the collaborative works across systems to address key issues of mutual concern, including sustaining the city's Youth Opportunity Grant–funded community-based youth centers and building capacity to support the successful community reintegration of youth returning from delinquent placement.

As a result of the active, high-profile involvement of the school district, issues of struggling and out-of-school youth have also become an integral component of the school district's high school reform agenda. Data analysis documenting the credit profiles and

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agency involvement of struggling students and out-of-school youth have led directly to the design of high-quality educational options that target the specific learning needs of these young people, creating an integrated approach to multiple pathways and alternative educational options.

A staffed partnership is critical for sustaining this systemic reform agenda.

Every community has individuals and organizations that are committed to improving outcomes for these youth. But many do not have a table where these entities can come together, align their work, and amplify their voices to gain traction on this complex agenda. To create such a table, experienced and savvy leaders in Philadelphia, Boston, and San Jose drew on long-standing partnerships with deep roots in school-to-career and youth workforce development and, in the case of San Jose, gang prevention and intervention, to bring

various advocates and experienced service providers together and use this moment of opportunity to raise the issue of struggling and out-of-school students higher on the radar of key district leaders.

In New York and Portland, the shape of the partnerships was driven in part by rapidly unfolding school reform efforts. The New York partnership brought together key players inside and outside the Department of Education to work together on issues emerging in the implementation of expanded options while strengthening their individual capacities to support struggling students and out-of-school youth. Collectively, this partnership has become a more effective engine for moving this work forward.

Portland's effort, meanwhile, built on a culture of collaboration and the momentum created by new district leadership to bring cross-sector leaders with decision-making authority to the table. The partnership there became a catalyst for innovative partnerships committed to cross-sector collaboration and enhancing options for struggling students and out-of-school youth.

In each community, staffed partnerships were able to broker relationships and build consensus on a shared agenda. The sophisticated lead organizations protected and moved a common agenda in each community that was necessarily greater than the sum of its parts.

Towards Sustainability

Delivering on the promise of quality options to graduation for *all* youth means changing the entire landscape of educational opportunity for the most vulnerable – a long-term commitment that depends on innovative and collaborative local action. This article shares the lessons learned from five such

Delivering on the promise of quality options to graduation for *all* youth means changing the entire landscape of educational opportunity for the most vulnerable – a long-term commitment that depends on innovative and collaborative local action.

efforts; promising work is emerging in many other communities across the country, as well. Taking advantage of their unique strengths and assets, these communities are embracing or expanding reforms to begin to address long-standing concerns about the education needs of vulnerable youth.

Sustaining reforms has proven to be a vexing challenge for educators – particularly at the district level. Historically, states and districts have not always worked together to implement education reform. State reforms can die at the district level because of a reluctance or lack of capacity at the local level to implement state mandates. Conversely, district reform efforts often push against state policies that constrain local innovations. For district reforms on behalf of vulnerable youth to hold, there must be a nexus between district and state reform policy.

A joint effort of Achieve Inc. and Jobs for the Future, funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, is attempting to build such a state and local nexus for reform. The project, Staying the Course: High Standards and Improved Graduation Rates, is working in three states – Indiana, Kentucky, and Massachusetts – to coordinate and align efforts at the state and district levels to increase educational opportunities and graduation rates for low-income and minority youth within a high-stakes environment. Ideally, what will emerge is a close coordination between programmatic and policy innovation, with state policy and regulation supporting districts to build their data infrastructure, their range of pathways and options for high school–aged students, and their
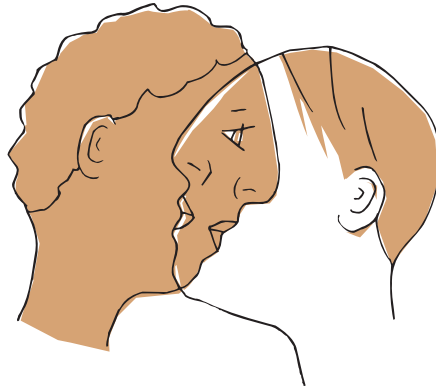
high school improvement, restructuring, and reform initiatives in ways that enable and sustain solutions to the dropout crisis – *at scale.*

In any context, high school reform is a daunting task. In an era of high-stakes accountability, improving the educational outcomes for vulnerable youth is a particularly ambitious goal. But the renewed commitment of states and districts to educational opportunities for all youth offers promise for realizing the goal, even as we recognize that significant challenges remain in taking reforms to scale and sustaining multiple pathways and options that provide for educational opportunity for *all* youth. Though the journey is long, the imperative for action is clear. As James Baldwin reminded us, *"These are all our children. We will all profit by, or pay for, whatever they become."*

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