

# The Special EDge

Summer 2010

Volume 23

Number 3

## Common Causes of the Over-Identification of Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Special Education Understanding and Addressing Disproportionality

# S

By Edward Fergus, PhD, Deputy Director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, New York University

Since 1968 when Lloyd Dunn\* brought to the attention of educators the over-representation of students of particular ethnicities in special education, countless research studies and reports—federal, state, and district—have documented the various facets of educational practice that influence these rates. Based on this work, we know a great deal about the effect of disproportionality on the educational and social mobility of racial and ethnic minority groups. For example, students in these groups are less likely to receive access to a rigorous and full curriculum, and they are more likely to have limited academic and postsecondary opportunities, limited interaction with “abled” or academically mainstreamed peers, and an increased sense of social stigmatization. Finally, these students are also more likely to be identified as needing special education services, saddling them with a disabilities label throughout their remaining school years.

Even though we are not clear about how or why disproportionality hap-

\* *Exceptional Children*; September 1968, Volume 35 Issue 1, pages 5–22.

pens, we do know the impact of disproportional representation on Black, Latino, and Native American students in special education. Researchers have added students who come from low-income families to that list, as well. Because the impact of disproportionality is generally negative, we have to examine how our educational policies and practices may be placing these racial and ethnic minority and low-income students at risk. Since 2004 this examination has been the work of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education (also known as the Technical Assistance Center on Disproportionality, at [www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/tacd](http://www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/tacd)).

Our work at the center has involved helping school districts cited for disproportionality to (1) understand the citation; (2) identify the root causes of this outcome; (3) develop a strategic plan for addressing the root causes; and (4) implement the plan and develop capacity to continuously monitor rates of disproportionality. Over the past six years we have developed and piloted a data-driven process for identifying disproportionality’s root causes, a process that has also given

us insight into the driving forces (internal and external to a school district) behind these root causes. Our work has focused on examining various areas of the schooling process in order to understand the interaction of school practice and student outcomes. We looked at three areas:

1. The quality of academic supports (e.g., type of core program, stage of core program implementation, capacity of instructional staff, and learning outcomes of students)

*Causes continued, page 6*

### Inside This Issue

**CDE Addresses  
Disproportionality**  
3

**Assessment and  
African American Students**  
8

**Resources on Disproportionality**  
13–15

**Creating Culturally Responsive  
Classrooms**  
16

*Insert*  
**The California Advisory Commission on  
Special Education:  
Annual Report**

Director, Special Education Division, California Department of Education	Fred Balcom
Contract Monitor and Project Liaison	Janet Canning-Digmon
Project Manager	Anne Davin
Editor	Mary Cichy Grady
Editorial Assistant	Giselle Blong
CDE Editorial Consultant	Allison Smith
Content Consultants	Linda Blong Geri West
Special Contributors	Chris Drouin Edward Fergus Janet Mandelstam



**Fred Balcom, Director**  
California Department of Education  
Special Education Division

I am honored to be selected as the new Director of the Special Education Division for the California Department of Education (CDE).

I come to this position with a background and perspective that I believe will continue to enhance the quality of the Division as we work to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. I have been a California teacher and school administrator, coordinated alternative and special education programs, drafted legislation and worked with legislators, written and executed grants, and managed statewide programs designed to improve our lowest-performing schools. I served as

*The Special EDge* is published three times each year by the Napa County Office of Education's CalSTAT Project (California Services for Technical Assistance and Training). Funding is provided by the California Department of Education, Special Education Division, through contract number CN100006 with Napa County Office of Education (NCOE), and from federal funds, State Grants #H027A080116A. Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the U. S. Department of Education, the California Department of Education, or Napa County Office of Education; nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement.

Circulation: 51,000

The information in this issue is in the public domain unless otherwise indicated. Readers are encouraged to copy and share but to credit CalSTAT. This issue is available on disk, audiotape, and in large type upon request. By going to CalSTAT's Web site—[www.calstat.org/infoPublications.html](http://www.calstat.org/infoPublications.html)—you can download PDF and text versions of this and previous newsletters.

Contact *The Special EDge* by phone at 707- 849-2275; e-mail at [giselle.blong@calstat.org](mailto:giselle.blong@calstat.org); or mail: *The Special EDge*, c/o NCOE/CalSTAT, 5789 State Farm Drive, Suite 230, Rohnert Park, California 94928



*Informing and supporting parents, educators, and other service providers on special education topics, focusing on research-based practices, legislation, technical support, and current resources*

Executive Director of the Yolo County First 5 Commission, promoting the benefits of articulation between and among services and programs designed for children in early childhood and those for students of school age. In the 1990s I served as Director of Special Education for Idaho. Most recently I was the Director of the District and School Improvement Division of the CDE, where I provided statewide leadership for the implementation of all aspects of federal Title I programs, education for the homeless, and categorical program monitoring.

This range of experience and perspective has provided me with a broad-based knowledge of the numerous programs and efforts within the CDE in general but, specifically and most importantly, with a clear understanding of what it takes to meet the needs of the individuals we serve: what it takes is for all of us to work together. Collectively we are parents, teachers, administrators, service providers, and agency personnel. Only by working together will we be able to build local capacity to meet the needs of our students. Only by working together will we be able to mitigate the most serious effects of California's current budget crisis. Only by working together will we all succeed.

As your new Director, I have already met with the Advisory Commission on Special Education, SELPA administrators, Parent Empowerment Center and Parent Training and Information Center directors, and other groups and shared my experiences and vision for new and enhanced relationships. I am fortunate to have inherited a committed, skilled, and experienced staff, whose members have provided tremendous support in my transition to this new role and who also believe in collaboration and in nurturing positive and productive relationships.

California offers many unique challenges and opportunities. As your new Director, I look forward to facing the challenges and the opportunities that lie ahead as we work together to educate and support students with disabilities in California. ♦

# California Addresses Disproportionality

**A**cross the country, students are disproportionately represented in special education by race and ethnicity. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is requiring California, along with other states, to measure and report on the occurrence of disproportionality in schools. The law calls for each state that receives IDEA monies to collect and examine data to determine two aspects related to disproportionality. The first involves whether or not “disproportionate representation” that is the result of inappropriate identification [20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(C); 34 CFR §300.600(d)(3)] based on race or ethnicity is occurring in the state’s local education agencies (LEAs, usually school districts). The second aspect of the law requires states, “in a separate and distinct obligation, to collect and examine numerical data to determine” whether school districts present “significant disproportionality” based on race or ethnicity [20 U.S.C. §1418(d); 34 CFR §300.646(b)].<sup>1</sup>

There are numerous hypotheses for the causes of disproportionality: the failure of general education to know how to effectively educate children from diverse backgrounds; the misuse of tests; the fact that many children from minority backgrounds do not have access to effective instruction, good teachers, or sufficient educational resources in both the school and the home; and then the simple and unrelenting fact of poverty. Russ Skiba, director of the Equity Project at Indiana University, writes of disproportionality as a phenomenon caused by a very complicated set of interacting factors that probably include “student characteristics, teacher

capabilities and attitudes, and unanalyzed sources of structural inequity and racial stereotype.”<sup>2</sup> Given the complexities that Skiba writes about—and the complexities of the law itself—the task of measuring and reducing conditions of disproportionality can be daunting for any state, and particularly challenging for a state as large and complex as California.

The chart on the next page summarizes the California Department of Education’s (CDE) approach to identifying and addressing disproportionality. More importantly, CDE is interested in identifying resources to assist school districts. To meet this challenge, CDE secured the talents of the Technical Assistance and Consulting Services (TACS) at the University of Oregon, which also holds the contract to provide special education technical assistance to all Western states. TACS has expertise in the development and analysis of state and school district data, organizational development and systems change, and education policy. Under the guidance of Caroline Moore and Cesar D’Agord, California’s disproportionality assistance efforts are now up and running.

## Updating Larry P.

TACS is assisting CDE in two additional efforts in the state’s improvement strategies related to disproportionality issues. One involves the “Larry P.” ruling, which refers to a legal case that was filed in 1984 against the state of California by African American parents. These parents argued that their children were given intelligence (IQ) tests that were culturally biased and that, because of these tests, their children were inappropriately identified as mentally retarded and placed in special education classes. The court ruled in favor of the parents. As a result, California schools cannot use IQ tests for the purpose of

identifying African American children as mentally retarded if those tests have not been validated or reviewed for evidence of racial and cultural bias by the Federal Court of Appeals.

Because the current guidelines and recommendations around the Larry P. findings were developed more than 20 years ago, TACS Consultant Sara Doutré is heading the effort to assist CDE in convening a taskforce that will examine the original guidelines and recommendations and bring them up to date with current research and practice. The taskforce will include individuals who have a stake in the outcome: parents, educators, consumers, psychologists, and P–16 Council and school board members. This group “has held preliminary planning sessions and will be fully functional in late summer,” according to Moore. The task force will ultimately issue a report that updates guidance for accurate and effective assessment practices for schools and school psychologists.

## Finding Exemplary Practices

IDEA states that a student cannot be identified as having a disability if lack of instruction—or poor quality of instruction—is the problem. So California needs to ensure that its schools are implementing effective instructional practices. This leads to the final task that TACS has taken on for California, a task that Moore refers to as “the fun one.” With a team of fellow evaluators, they are looking for schools that “are doing it right.” By examining such data as school size, the composition of the student population, the performance of schools in statewide assessments, the socioeconomics of the student population based on free and reduced lunch, and

*CDE continued, page 5*

# Significant Disproportionality and Disproportionate Representation

## What Is Significant Disproportionality?

{34 CFR§300.646}

### Definition

Significant disproportionality is the determination that a school district (LEA) has significant over-representation based on race and ethnicity overall, by disability, by placement in particular educational settings, or by disciplinary actions.

### Calculations

A school district is considered to have significant disproportionality if it

- 1) fails the ethnic disparity calculation for the most recent three years; and
- 2) has one or more areas of over-representation by race/ethnicity in general, by disability, by disciplinary action, or by placement.

### Required Corrective Action

If a school district is considered to have significant disproportionality, that district is required to

- 1) conduct a review of policies, procedures, and practices;
- 2) publicly report any changes to its policies, procedures, and practices;
- 3) conduct an in-depth programmatic self-assessment using a nationally recognized assessment tool;
- 4) prepare a Significant Disproportionality Coordinated Early Intervening Services Plan;
- 5) reserve at least 15 percent of IDEA grant funds to address the issues of significant disproportionality; and
- 6) lose the ability to use IDEA funds to reduce its “maintenance of effort” (MOE) by up to 50% of increased federal funds.



## What Is Disproportionate Representation?

{34 CFR §§300.173 and 300.600(d)(3)}

### Definition

Disproportionate representation is the determination that, within a school district (LEA), students in special education are over- or under-represented based on race/ethnicity overall or by disability due to

- 1) inappropriate policies, procedures, or practices related to identification, or
- 2) an inability of the district to comply with requirements relating to discipline, to the development and implementation of IEPs, and/or to the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports and procedural safeguards.

### Calculations

A school district is considered to have disproportionate representation if the district

- 1) fails ethnic disparity calculations for the most recent year for which data are available;
- 2) has one or more areas of over-representation by race/ethnicity in general, by disability, or by disciplinary action; and
- 3) identifies any areas of noncompliance with state or federal requirements using CDE’s self-assessment of policies, procedures, and practices.

### Required Corrective Action

If a school district is identified as having disproportionate representation, the district is required to complete corrective action plans developed by CDE and to publicly report any changes to their policies, procedures, and practices.

### For additional information

about the terms, calculations, and requirements listed in this chart, visit CDE’s Web site at [www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qal/disproimpacts.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qal/disproimpacts.asp).

school discipline trends—and visiting school sites, the team will select academically successful school districts with diverse characteristics, but without disproportionality. “We are looking in particular for the successful implementation of positive behavioral interventions and supports [PBIS] and response to intervention [RtI],” says Moore. “We are hoping to find pockets of excellence and through that discovery determine what strategies, processes, and leadership approaches are successful in avoiding disproportionality. Essentially, we want to know what those schools are doing to make them successful.” The effective strategies and systems that this team discovers will help to inform a state-wide technical assistance project that is currently in development.

### Technical Assistance for Disproportionality

An important part of the technical assistance that will be provided to California’s school districts will come out of the State Performance Plan Technical Assistance Project (SPPTA) at the Napa County Office of Education (NCOE). The SPPTA is bringing CDE staff and other national leaders together to design a system that provides support to schools and school districts in reducing and eliminating instances of disproportionate representation. The assistance will be available in three levels of intensity, called tiers.

The most intense tier of support, considered the third or top tier,<sup>3</sup> is designed to provide technical assistance to those school districts that have been identified as being significantly disproportionate. Through this CDE-funded TA plan, these districts will have the opportunity to make use of facilitators who will be trained to help them access pertinent resources, link them to appropriate professional

development for accomplishing their plans for reducing disproportionality, conduct regular check-ins, and generally assist them in improving their systems. One of the specific areas this TA is designed to examine is how and when students receive the services they need, in turn promoting the previously mentioned RtI as a proven approach to eliminating instances of “instructional disability.”

The second or middle tier of support is aimed at school districts with data that show some areas of disproportionality. Similar to what is being offered in tier three, tier two

---

*This plan will be  
flexible, cohesive, and  
responsive to the needs  
of individual  
school districts.*

---

involves making consultants available to a select number of these districts. In general, this tier-two support will help districts examine their systems and get the help they need to identify and address the causes of their specific areas of disproportionality.

The first tier has the broadest reach: it focuses on increasing a general awareness of issues related to disproportionality and on disseminating information to any and all districts working proactively to ensure that students of certain ethnicities are not over- or under-represented in special education. CDE currently has a Web site describing the impacts of disproportionality on special education and providing a wealth of links to research-based information and resources ([www.cde.ca.gov/sp/selqaldisproimpacts.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/selqaldisproimpacts.asp)). The SPPTA project is in the process of designing

an additional site that supports CDE’s efforts by including Webinars and interactive training modules.

According to NCOE Project Specialist Linda Blong, the SPPTA is a process in development, with some parts currently in place and others still being shaped. What the Larry P. taskforce recommends, for example, will inform the resources and training modules that will be on both the CDE and the SPPTA Web sites, as will the successful strategies that Moore’s and D’Agord’s team discover in diverse but successfully non-disproportionate school districts.

A team of consultants from CDE who have expertise in issues of disproportionality is currently working to design and integrate the entire SPPTA system, with input from a focus group of parents, teachers, and SELPA and school district representatives—all of whom “have strong and very helpful responses to what is needed in the field,” says Blong. “These partners are working to refine the three tiers, and this evolving effort is gradually constructing a plan that will be flexible, cohesive, and responsive to the needs of individual districts. The ultimate goal is to make sure that a school district’s efforts to reduce disproportionality are effective and that they are integrated and fold seamlessly into its master plan [Local Education Agency Plan, or LEAP], so that all efforts are mutually supportive and none is duplicative.”

### Beyond Disproportionality

While the SPPTA system is initially being designed to address disproportionality, the ultimate goal is for the system’s essential structure to serve as a TA-delivery model for other important areas of school improvement, from preschool assessment to post-school employment. This system’s three tiers of support—the delivery of (1) a broad

CDE continued, page 8

2. The services provided for struggling students (e.g., type of available interventions, frequency of intervention usage, stage of implementation, length of intervention implementation, and number of students participating in intervention programs by race/ethnicity, gender, and grade level)
3. The predominant cultural beliefs (perceptions of race and class, perceptions of how race and class interact in school practice, and cultural responsiveness of current policies and practices)

In examining the data gathered for six years across 30 districts, we have identified common root causes of disproportionality. These causes fall into one of three categories: (1) gaps in the implementation of curriculum and instruction, (2) inconsistencies in the pre-referral process for special education, and (3) predominant (and counterproductive) beliefs about ability. While the causes we cite are not exclusive, they tend to be present in every district and to influence in significant ways the rate of disproportionality in school districts.

**Gaps in the Implementation of Curriculum and Instruction**

Endemic to most school districts is the question of instructional “wellness,” which includes responsiveness. Does—and can—the instruction maximize the learning capacity of all students? In our data-driven process of determining root causes, there were multiple causes related to the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction that emerged as contributing to disproportionality rates.

**1. Minimally articulated core curriculum and lack of consistent support of teaching ability**

Due to various factors, many school districts did not have in place a current curriculum or instructional approach that considered the range of ability among learners. As a result, students who persistently could not attain proficiency on the state exam were promptly considered for special education services. Additionally, some districts were continuously changing or adding curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies from year to



year. Although every school district contends with such changes, we found that in the districts we studied such structural changes affected struggling learners the most. For example, students at the lowest quartile of performance were receiving services to address skill deficiencies while curricular and assessment programs were simultaneously changing. Therefore, instructional staff were going through their own steep learning curve regarding new curriculum and/or assessment while they were working with students to address skill deficiencies based on the prior curriculum or assessment.

**Remedy:** Identify and sustain the implementation of appropriate reading and math core programs that are

sequenced for kindergarten through twelfth grade. Additionally, sequence and sustain support for nontenured and tenured teachers to build their ability to effectively implement curriculum and assessment.

**2. Too many interventions for struggling learners**

In our examination of curriculum and the related interventions, we found that many school districts maintained an exhaustive list of interventions for students who demonstrate academic difficulty. This overabundance of interventions for struggling

learners meant that the core curriculum itself did not have the capacity to provide support for a wide range of learners; it also meant that the related instructional capacity of the staff was not organized to address the needs of these learners. Unfortunately, without a well-articulated core curriculum and instructional program that serves all students, this gap disproportionately affects not only struggling learners but also students new to the districts

(including newly arrived English language learners [ELLs]).

**Remedy:** Identify and implement targeted, research-based intervention programs for students who demonstrate academic difficulty while the core curriculum program is redeveloped.

**3. Inconsistent knowledge of the purpose and implementation of curriculum, assessment, or instructional strategy**

Various school districts were using inappropriate tools to diagnose reading-skill deficiencies, and because the district staff was not thoroughly knowledgeable in the use of these assessments, teachers used interventions and strategies that were not tailored to meet the specific needs of the children

involved. As a result, instructional support teams and/or child study teams would receive information about a child's reading difficulty after a year of inadequate interventions.

**Remedy:** Provide continuous professional development on the purpose, application, and interpretation of curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies.

#### 4. Poorly structured intervention services for struggling learners

Even though legislation in some states requires academic intervention services for struggling learners, particularly in Title 1 school districts, our root cause process revealed that the implementation of these programs was inconsistent, and they became the gateways for special education referrals. For example, students referred and classified for special education tended to have below-basic proficiency, and the staff responsible for academic interventions had not received training in how to help these students become proficient.

**Remedy:** Develop a tiered system of academic supports for struggling learners; identify research-based interventions for targeted groups of students; and target professional development for academic intervention staff (both nontenured and tenured teachers, including content specialists).

#### Inconsistencies in the Pre-referral Process

Our process of determining root causes also revealed the following inadequacies that contributed to rates of disproportionality.

##### 1. Inconsistency in the referral process, including intervention strategies and referral forms

School districts are generally good at abiding by special education regulations, including referral timeframes and the involvement of practitioners. We found, however, that school

districts maintained inconsistent pre-referral information and used different forms for each school building in a district. While most of these systemic inconsistencies were not intentional, they did reflect the bifurcation that often exists in districts between special education and general education. In many instances, special education directors described how they could only suggest to



building administrators that they adopt one common referral form or that the administrators insist that general education teachers fill out the specifics of the pre-referral strategies.

**Remedy:** Develop a common process and form for pre-referrals, and outline annual reviews for examining the wellness of this process.

##### 2. Limited information regarding intervention strategies

One of our steps in examining root causes involved reviewing a representative sample of records; this ranged from 40 to 100 files, depending upon the number of students in a district receiving special education services. On most forms, we found a place for general education teachers to describe the strategies they already had used in their effort to help a struggling student. In most instances, these

teachers noted how certain strategies—such as moving a student's seat, matching the student with a buddy, or providing the content or skill again but at a slower pace—did not help, even though the teachers considered each strategy viable. The plethora of strategies lacked any documented evidence that they served as a competent response. Nor did teachers note any type of pre- or post-evaluative summary of the strategies' ultimate impact. Instead, their standard answer was "I tried and it didn't work."

**Remedy:** Provide targeted and embedded professional development for teachers and district staff regarding response to intervention (RTI), specifically research-based interventions, assessments, progress monitoring, and instructional support teams or teacher assistance teams.

##### 3. Limited knowledge of assessment

Through our data analysis process with school districts, we discovered that an inconsistency in knowledge surrounding the purpose and implementation of curriculum, assessment, or instructional strategies also affected the rate of referral to special education. Some school districts, for example, were using assessment tools to diagnose reading skill deficiency when these tools were designed merely to screen students at risk for reading difficulty. The inconsistent knowledge surrounding assessments allowed for interventions and strategies not tailored to meet the specific needs of children. As a result, instructional support teams and/or child study teams would receive information about a child's reading difficulty after a year of inadequate interventions.

**Remedy:** Provide targeted professional development on assessments, including those from such clearinghouses as [www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org).

*Causes, continued on page 8*

## Predominant Beliefs About Ability

### 1. Special education is viewed as “fixing” struggling students.

In most school districts the general and special education staff rarely interact with each other. General education teachers recommend students for evaluation based on the belief that special education contains the “magic fairy dust” that will “fix” the learning capacity and outcomes of students. As part of our data analysis process, we developed a multi-disciplinary team comprised of several core members: the district superintendent, principals, special education teachers, general education teachers, content supervisors, a special education supervisor, a psychologist, a parent-group representative, parents, and the pre-referral interventions coordinator. In most instances when the teams were initially convened, many of the individuals did not know each other or understand each other’s mandate. Because many of these individuals rarely interacted, their answers to instruction- and intervention-based questions lacked any cross-disciplinary perspective.

**Remedy:** General and special education teachers participate together in professional development that focuses on curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies, including special education regulations. Both general and special educators become involved in the analysis of data regarding interventions for struggling students.

### 2. Poor and racial/ethnic minority students are viewed as not “ready” for school.

We commonly heard school district staff members struggling with the idea that somehow being from a low-income family and from a racial or ethnic minority group

compromises how “ready” these students are for their school environment. More specifically, school and district staff at times perceived that the cultural practices of the home environment made students from low-income and racial/ethnic minority families unable to learn. In one district, many of the educators rallied around the concept of “urban behavior” to explain why Black students were in special education. In another district, an ESL teacher hypothesized that English language learners were over-represented in special education with speech/language impairments because in “Latin culture they listen to music loud.” And yet another district suggested that Latino and ELL students are such a distraction in the classroom that they can be better served with “other” disability groups. Unfortunately, such perspectives are not found solely in school districts cited for racial/ethnic disproportionality. In fact, such perspectives can be found in many urban, suburban, and rural school districts. Part of the difficulty with these kinds of beliefs is that they distract from an educator’s ability to address how teaching matters in learning outcomes. That is, we found practitioners who were willing to cite family and community as the reason why some students were struggling academically, but they credit their own teaching practices for the performance of proficient students. There needs to be a paradigm alignment regarding the connection between teaching and learning.

**Remedy:** Provide continuous professional development that addresses how to create culturally responsive school environments via leadership, coaching, and mentoring.

## Conclusion

No one pretends that these issues are easy to address. Taken together, the root causes of disproportionality

represent a significant set of circumstances that few school districts can tackle alone. Support is available in many states, and California is currently designing a system of technical assistance for identifying and remedying the causes of disproportionality (see article, page 3). Whatever challenges a school district faces, it is important to remember that they all do not have to be addressed at once. Small, steady, and determined changes—made with good heart—can lead to major transformations for schools. And more importantly, for Black, Latino, Native American, and low-income students. ♦

base of general information to all schools, (2) focused assistance to those schools or districts whose data show an emerging problem, and (3) detailed assistance where compliance violations exist—reflect careful planning from its inception, since the system is being modeled in both structure and philosophy on the pyramid framework of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). Given the impressive track record of PBIS, California’s systematic effort to address disproportionality is being built on a solid foundation. ♦

## Notes

1. OSEP memo: “Disproportionality of Racial and Ethnic Groups in Special Education,” April 24, 2007
2. Russel J. Skiba, et al., “Achieving Equity in Special Education: History, Status, and Current Challenges,” *Exceptional Children*, 74(3) 264–288.
3. These tiers mirror the PBIS pyramid: the first tier is the bottom of the triangle (or pyramid) and addresses the largest population. The second tier is in the middle and provides a more intense and focused level of support and assistance; and the third tier offers the most intense help to remedy issues of (in this case) disproportionality. For more information, go to [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).



# Evaluating Students with Tests That Avoid Bias

**A** school psychologist is teaching a child a magic trick. It looks as if they are playing, but the psychologist is actually recording data while he observes and assesses the child's processing and problem-solving skills. All of this is taking place in a casual, non-threatening environment that is intentionally separate from traditional learning processes and settings. The psychologist's observations will become one component of a multi-faceted approach to assessing students for special education.

This holistic assessment—looking at a child in multiple environments and conducting interviews with parents and “cultural brokers”—is being developed and field-tested by the Diagnostic Center of Northern California under the leadership of Mary Anne Nielsen, Director. The center's current focus is on African American students who are already assigned to special education, but proponents of this approach to assessment say it could be used with other populations and at other times—for an initial assessment for special education, in particular.

It has been more than 30 years since a California court banned IQ (intelligence quotient) testing of African American students for placement in special education. The court case in question, *Larry P. v. Riles* (see page 3), was a class action lawsuit on behalf of minority children who were over-represented in special education classes.

They still are. Using 2006–2007 California Department of Education

data, the Diagnostic Center found that African American students make up 7.6 percent of the public school population but comprise 16.2 percent of the enrollment in special education. (European Americans, on the other hand, make up 29.4 percent of the total population, but only 12.4 percent are assigned



to special education.) And school psychologists are still struggling with how to implement the *Larry P.* decision.

To get a picture of the current state of assessments, the Diagnostic Center surveyed psychologists in major school districts throughout Northern California in 2006. “The survey confirmed our suspicions that people in the field were unsure of what to do. They were generally confused and looking for some structure,” says Renee Dawson, PhD, the center's Assistant Director. Half of the respondents indicated

that they were not satisfied with the current, available methods of assessing African American students. The survey showed that 71 percent of the districts had no standard protocol for assessing African American students. According to Dawson, the survey also showed that the Diagnostic Center could serve psychologists by finding “an appropriate psychological process for examining a child. A test in a room under artificial circumstances only measures how good you are at pencil-and-paper tests,” says Dawson. “A lot of kids don't do well with pencil-and-paper tests but can problem solve and strategize in other ways. We say ‘look at the child in multiple environments.’”

So Dawson and her colleagues at the Diagnostic Center set out to develop a process for conducting culturally appropriate assessments without using standardized tests. They created a matrix that looks at several competencies, including reasoning, concept formation, planning, and memory and learning. The data to assess these functions are gathered in many ways, including observations in multiple settings; interviews with parents, classroom teachers and, depending on age, the student; and reviews of school records and examples of student work.

This plan, Dawson says, is aligned with the evaluation procedures outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, which calls for the use of “a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, develop-

*Assessment, continued page 10*

mental, and academic information” about a student. The plan also follows current CDE guidelines, which state that an assessment cannot discriminate on the basis of “environment, culture, and economic disadvantage”; and the people who administer and interpret the test must be “knowledgeable of and sensitive to the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students.”

“It’s necessary to step out of your comfort zone and observe the student,” Dawson says. “Watching a child on a playground, for example, allows you to observe social skills, problem-solving, language. Is his behavior working for him?” Watching a child play a game can indeed reveal much about his behavior: Did he remember the rules? Did he follow the steps? How did he react when he won or lost?

But not just any game will do. “You have to bring in activities characteristic of the child’s culture,” Dawson says. “You have to know the appropriate games and settings in which to observe.”

Dawson tells the story of an African American girl who was selectively mute and didn’t speak in the classroom. “We took out a board game that she knew and began to play. I pretended to be confused about the rules of the game.” Eventually the girl spoke to Dawson. Without the anxiety and stress of the classroom setting, “I could see she had language and could use it appropriately.” Yet, “we can’t assume we understand behavior just from observing,” Dawson says. Interviews are necessary to determine if what is observed—and how it is interpreted—is accurate. For that, a cultural broker is required. That person

could be a parent, another staff person, or a community member who is familiar with the history, beliefs, and patterns of the student’s culture and can bridge the gap between cultures. A parent, Dawson says, is the ideal broker, “and through careful interviewing, significant information can be obtained.”

This process of observation and interviewing is not new, Dawson says, “but it is challenging and time-consuming,” especially in its initial phase. “We’re always exploring and modifying the process, and we believe over time it can move faster.” But it will continue to require a collaborative effort at the school and district levels.

---

*“A child is more  
than just a number  
on a test.”*

---

The Diagnostic Center’s idea of holistic assessment is being field tested in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District in Contra Costa County, where Carolyn Sakkis is the lead school psychologist. “We were on board with this from the beginning,” she says, “because we’ve long been concerned with over-identification” of minority students “and we’d like to do better assessments of these kids.” (In the 2008–2009 school year, African Americans were 5.2 percent of the general population at Mt. Diablo but 9.3 percent of the special education population.)

Four psychologists for the Mt. Diablo USD were trained by and are working with a psychologist from the Diagnostic Center in this pilot project. “It’s a work in progress,” says Sakkis. “It’s about changing

your mindset. A child is more than just a number on a test. You have to get to know the quality of the child, how they learn or don’t learn. By paying close attention to what you are observing and learning through interviews, you are picking up nuances you didn’t get historically when tests were skewed to middle-class whites.”

The pilot project is working with students who have already been identified as needing special education services, most of whom are in elementary school and have been in special education for at least three years. But Sakkis and others see the potential for using this assessment earlier in the special education process. “I’d like to try this with students not yet identified,” she says. And Dawson wonders: “If we did this at the initial assessment, would we have fewer children in special education?”

Thus far, Dawson says, field testing shows that some children, with support, can be removed from special education. The pilot phase of the project will be completed in December 2010. Dawson says the Diagnostic Center anticipates “going public” in fall 2011.

Beyond addressing the question of over-identification of minorities in special education, the intent of the process, Dawson says, is to direct the instructional process. Information gathered in the matrix about the student’s reasoning, processing, learning, and other skills allows educators to approach instruction in such a way that the student is able—in fact, encouraged—to use those skills in the classroom. The holistic assessment, she says, can serve “as a road map to assist in making education more successful for the child.” ♦

—Janet Mandelstam

of Education at Georgia State University)—emerged with a framework of what educators needed in their professional development to effectively teach an increasingly diverse student body.

The P-16 Division, says Dr. Sia-Maat, “then took the framework on the road. We had three focus group meetings in Northern, Central, and Southern California to get input from school and district personnel.” In October 2008, “we brought the framework and focus group input to Equity Alliance at Arizona State University and said ‘this is what we have to work with.’ We asked them to assist us in developing culturally responsive professional development modules for teachers.”

CDE could not have found a more qualified organization. In the words of Equity Alliance’s Co-Director of Technical Assistance, Kathleen King Thorius, the organization has “been involved with disproportionality work through a variety of projects for a number of years.” This is perhaps an understatement. Originally funded after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Supreme Court’s landmark “Brown vs. Board of Education” decision, the earliest version of Equity Alliance was charged more than 40 years ago with aiding in the desegregation of public schools. Possibly best known as the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, (NCCRESt), Equity Alliance is housed at Arizona State University and has, since its inception, promoted “equity, access, participation, and outcomes for all students.” Led by principal investigators and professors Elizabeth Kozleski and Alfredo Artiles, nationally renowned experts on disproportionality, and Director JoEtta Gonzales, the center was recently “awarded a federal grant to serve as the Region IX Equity Assistance Center,” says King Thorius.

“Our job is to support state and local school systems in Arizona, California, and Nevada with equity-related issues, working also with the Office of Civil Rights, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Education.”

Taking up the charge from the P-16 Division, Equity Alliance “developed content in collaboration with CDE and other California educational stakeholders and then developed the processes and platform” for delivering the content, says King Thorius. The project has since met with numerous additional groups—Safe and Healthy Schools, California’s Disproportionality Workgroup, the Special Education Division, district teachers and administrators from throughout the state, and representatives from several county offices of education—whose input has helped to further develop and refine the content and process for professional development.

The first part of this system involves online courses for teachers, but this module does more than offer instructional strategies. “To get at issues of equity,” says King Thorius, “it is so important for teachers to examine their own identities before they look at issues of practice. So [through these online courses] we help teachers look at and question their own beliefs, attitudes, and values and how these factors—often unconsciously—show up in the classroom.” The module also will help teachers reflect on the value of non-English languages that are the first language of some of their students; recognize the importance of any differences between the culture of school and that of students and their families and then, when possible, mitigate those differences; recognize and incorporate into classroom activities the cultural values that children bring to school; and provide instructional materials that are culturally responsive.

With the module for teachers almost

completed, Equity Alliance is currently focused on creating a professional development strand for school leaders and administrators that will support the implementation of the courses for teachers. According to King Thorius, “it is critically important to involve individuals who know the cultural climate, people who can address needs and negotiate the process, given the needs of a particular locale. Our intent is to make the learning contextual. So we are doing our best to build a design that includes people who are aware of the specific issues at every step of the way.

“This [leadership strand] will help district leaders and administrators learn how to lead conversations about the content of the online modules. We can’t simply put the modules up and tell the districts to just ‘do it.’ District leaders need to understand and believe in the value of the content, but they also need to be aware of the possible range of reactions that teachers might have as they engage the content and be able to lead both formal and informal conversations about race, culture, and educational equity. So this leadership strand will also help bring teachers and administrators together in real time so they can discuss the content and build on the new information, on the needs of the teachers, and on the needs of the students.”

The model has been beta tested, and both the online course and the leadership strand will be piloted in the fall. “We are currently in the process of selecting three districts to help us refine the whole system,” says King Thorius. “There will then be teacher and administrator representatives from three schools from each district and two liaisons from each district, one who understands the requirements of the technical

infrastructure and the other who understands the cultural context and content needs of the schools. We will revise the modules based on their suggestions and roll everything out at a larger scale.”

While the approach and design for these modules are informed by the experience of Equity Alliance, they also are grounded in research and theory, particularly the work of John Bransford, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking,<sup>3</sup> who posit that learners operate within two cultural realms. As King Thorius explains, one realm involves “the cultural beliefs, knowledge, and habits learners acquire in their cultural community throughout their lives,” and the second “encompasses the cultural practices of the institutions in which [learners] receive formal education—schools and classrooms.” Educators’ awareness of these two realms is important, says King Thorius, because research shows that the cultural practices of schools and educational systems “can perpetuate inequitable conditions for groups of students that have been historically marginalized due to their race, language background, gender, or national origin.” Equity Alliance’s focus is on “designing new approaches to solving intractable, culturally bound issues like equity.”

Of course, the implementation of these new approaches ultimately rests with teachers and school administrators. And what research seems to be suggesting is significant: that the success of some minority children is inextricably bound to the ability of the teacher not just to deliver content but to reflect on and “understand the nature of the learner from both of these cultural perspectives”—and then to respond with pedagogical creativity and cultural sensitivity.

Equity Alliance is weaving strategies for developing these kinds of skills into both professional development strands, shaping them into more than simple delivery systems for information on race and culture. Both strands will involve cycles of inquiry and strategies for actively engaging participants in the content and directly applying it.

Equity Alliance has done other work with building the capacity of leaders to deal with issues of race and culture, and its staff members have designed and taught many online courses. But, says King Thorius, “this is the first time the focus on cultural responsiveness, online training, and face-to-face capacity building have all come together in one set of learning experiences for educators. It is very exciting.”

King Thorius, Sia-Maat, Gonzales, and the many others active in developing these training modules are deeply committed to the importance of culturally responsive teaching. And their effort seems to carry with it a refreshing degree of pragmatism. “We are trying to find a way to close the achievement gap and impact disproportionality,” says Sia-Maat. “The folks at CDE are interested in

continuing to refine both pieces [the strands for teachers and for administrators] to make sure we have the right kind of training. Essentially, we’re flying and building at the same time.” And then he adds, “But if we launch this pilot and find it is not working, we will close it down. If it’s not going to close the achievement gap, we’re not going to do it.”

Given the commitment of everyone involved in the project, their thorough approach to determining the best content and process, and the track record of Equity Alliance, this professional development system holds great promise for the success of teachers and students alike.

For more information, e-mail Shadidi Sia-Maat at [ssiamaat@cde.ca.gov](mailto:ssiamaat@cde.ca.gov). ♦

**Notes**

1. Kozol, Jonathan. (2005). *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Crown Publishers.
2. King, K.A., Kozleski, E.B., Gonzales, J., Capullo, K. (2009). *Inclusive Education for Equity*. Professional Learning Module Series. Equity Alliance at Arizona State University.
3. *How People Learn*, by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, is free and available online at [www.nap.edu/openbook/0309065577/1/bttml/index.html](http://www.nap.edu/openbook/0309065577/1/bttml/index.html).

**Should *The Special EDge* Go “Green”?**

How do you like to read *The Special EDge*? What do you think of the newsletter being made available primarily as an e-mailed attachment or as a downloadable file from the *EDge* Web site? Please let us know what you think by e-mailing, phoning, faxing, or writing to us; or by completing an online form. One way or another, we look forward to receiving your answers to the following questions:

- ✓ How do you prefer to read *The Special EDge*: online, in PDF, or in hard copy?
- ✓ Would you read the newsletter less if it were available only electronically?
- ✓ Do you ever share articles from *The Special EDge* with friends or colleagues?
- ✓ Have you ever used an article or insert from *The Special EDge* in a professional development training?

**E-mail:** [giselle.blong@calstat.org](mailto:giselle.blong@calstat.org)

**Phone:** Giselle at 707-849-2275

**Fax:** *The Special EDge* at 707-586-2735

**Visit:** [www.calstat.org/Greensurvey/](http://www.calstat.org/Greensurvey/)

**Mail:** *EDge* Going Green c/o Giselle

CalSTAT/NCOE

5789 State Farm Drive, Suite 230

Rohnert Park, CA 94928

The RiSE (Resources in Special Education) Library freely lends materials to California residents; the borrower only pays for return postage. Go to [www.pbpc.com/services/libraries](http://www.pbpc.com/services/libraries) to view the library's complete holdings. To order materials, phone or e-mail RiSE librarian Judy Bower: 408-727-5775; [judy@pbpc.com](mailto:judy@pbpc.com).

### Books for School Leaders

#### *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*

Glenn Eric Singleton and Curtis Linton. 2006. 304 pages. Examining the achievement gap through the prism of race, this book explains how to help educators understand why performance inequity persists and how to develop a curriculum that promotes true academic parity. Includes facilitator's guide. Call #24150, 24151, 24152, or 24153.

#### *The Culturally Proficient School: An Implementation Guide for School Leaders*

Randall B. Lindsey. 2004. 192 pages. Designed for principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders, this book offers practical strategies, tools, and resources for making schools culturally proficient. Call #24137.

#### *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*

Randall B. Lindsey. 1999. 274 pages. This guide provides school leaders with practical and field-tested applications of concepts about cultural proficiency. The book includes structured activities for developing cultural proficiency in educational settings. Call #24145 or 24146.

#### *Improving Schools for African American Students: A Reader for Educational Leaders*

Sheryl Denbo and Lynson Moore Beau-lieu, eds. 2002. 288 pages. This collection of articles addresses such issues as policy reform, the importance of high-quality teaching, and the improvement

of schools in order to support the academic achievement of African American students. Call #24138.

#### *Leadership on Purpose: Promising Practices for African American and Hispanic Students*

Rosemary P. Papa. 2002. 105 pages. By drawing on the best practices of 13 exemplary schools, this book highlights how ethnically diverse (African American and Latino) students can attain educational success. The book offers leadership strategies for principals, tactics for successful curriculum and classroom instruction, and approaches for meaningfully connecting with parents. Call #24144.

### Books for Teachers

#### *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*

Gloria Ladson-Billings. 2009. 256 pages. In this second edition of her critically acclaimed book, the author shows how cultural relevance in a classroom is achieved by working with the unique strengths of each child. The book challenges readers to envision intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant classrooms that improve the lives of not just African American students, but of all children. Call #24143.

#### *English Language Learners with Special Education Needs: Identification, Assessment, and Instruction*

Alfredo Artiles and Alba Ortiz, eds. 2002. 250 pages. While describing the challenges involved in identifying, placing, and teaching English language learners with special education needs, this book describes model programs and approaches, assessment methods, strategies for parent/school collaboration, and more. Call #24133 or 24134.

#### *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies*

Bonnie M. Davis. 2006. 184 pages.

Constructed as a reflective workbook for teachers who work with students from varied backgrounds, this book offers successful strategies for teachers of all subjects and grade levels and for establishing a school climate for teaching diverse learners. Call #24149.

#### *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*

Pauline Gibbons. 2002. 165 pages. This book explains how mainstream elementary classroom teachers with little or no English-as-a-second-language training can meet the needs of linguistically diverse students. Call #24147 or 24148.

#### *Teaching African American Learners to Read: Perspectives and Practices*

Bill Hammond. 2005. 368 pages. This book guides teachers, educators, and administrators in selecting the best research-based practices for successfully teaching African American learners to read. It identifies best practices, considers the significance of culture in the teaching and learning process, and explores issues of assessment. Call #24136.

#### *Toward Excellence with Equity: An Emerging Vision for Closing the Achievement Gap*

Ronald F. Ferguson. 2007. 283 pages. The author synthesizes 15 years of research into how progress in narrowing the achievement gap is influenced by school policies and practices, and on the importance of lifestyles and informal social processes that play out between children and their parents and peers. The author sets forth a wide-ranging and compelling vision for closing the achievement gap. Call #24132.

#### *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education*

Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education. 2002. 488 pages. This book examines why racial and ethnic minority students are disproportionately represented in special education and gifted and talented programs. Call #24142.

# Internet Resources

## Assistance in Reducing Disproportionality

[www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qal/disproimpacts.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qal/disproimpacts.asp)

Materials related to critical values and beliefs, background, data, and strategies regarding disproportionality are featured on this page from the California Department of Education's Web site.

[www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qal/disproresources.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qal/disproresources.asp)

The California Department of Education lists tools for California local education agencies (LEAs) to use in addressing issues of disproportionate representation and significant disproportionality.

[www.nccrest.org/Briefs/students\\_in\\_SPED\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.nccrest.org/Briefs/students_in_SPED_Brief.pdf)

Sources of federally sponsored technical assistance, demonstration projects, information, and scientifically based research to help states and LEAs decrease instances of disproportionality are listed at this site.

## Culturally Responsive Teaching

[www.maec.org/cross/index.html#return](http://www.maec.org/cross/index.html#return)

*Cross-Cultural Communication: An Essential Dimension of Effective Education* explains how students with different cultural norms are at risk of school failure "if teachers have little knowledge, sensitivity, or appreciation of the diversity in communication styles." This booklet, available at the above URL, explains how teachers can use vernacular language systems to enrich their instruction of standard English. Techniques for this approach are discussed.

[www.newhorizons.org/strategies/styles/guild.htm](http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/styles/guild.htm)

*"Diversity, Learning Style, and Culture"* examines the impact of diversity on student learning, exploring how a teacher's understanding of learning styles and culture can help him examine his own "institutional practices and become

sensitive to providing diverse learning experiences. Intentional instructional diversity will benefit all students."

[www.nccrest.org/publications/tools/assessment.html](http://www.nccrest.org/publications/tools/assessment.html)

*Equity in Special Education Placement: A School Self-Assessment Guide for Culturally Responsive Practice* is a self-assessment instrument designed to help elementary schools create culturally responsive programming and instruction for all students, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

[www.alliance.brown.edu/tddl-strategies/crt-principles.shtml](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tddl-strategies/crt-principles.shtml)

*Principles for Culturally Responsive Teaching* outlines the characteristics of a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.

[www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucbd/nccc/documents/Checklist.CSHN.doc.pdf](http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucbd/nccc/documents/Checklist.CSHN.doc.pdf)

*Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children with Disabilities & Special Health Needs and Their Families* is a checklist created to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of personnel to the importance of cultural diversity and cultural competence in human service settings. The document provides concrete examples of the kinds of values and practices that foster such an environment.

[http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=9853#toc](http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=9853#toc)

This newly expanded edition of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* connects classroom activities with learning behavior; it also offers new research about the mind and the brain, answering such questions as "How do experts learn and how is this different from non-experts? What can teachers and schools do with curricula, classroom

settings, and teaching methods to help children learn most effectively?"

## English Language Learners

[www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/nclr/edells\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/nclr/edells_assessment.pdf)

*Educating English Language Learners: Understanding and Using Assessment* guides schools in developing their capacity to provide appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment for students who are English language learners. It also offers suggestions for increasing educators' awareness of how to access relevant resources. While its emphasis is on charter schools, the guide would be of use to any K–12 school.

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/20074011.pdf>

*Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades*, from the What Works Clearinghouse, is a guide developed by experts for teachers, principals, staff specialists and district-level administrators; it offers five recommendations for literacy instruction for English learners in the elementary grades.

[http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning\\_Support/Special\\_Education/Evaluation\\_Program\\_Planning\\_Supports/index.html](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/Special_Education/Evaluation_Program_Planning_Supports/index.html)

*The ELL Companion to Reducing Bias in Special Education Evaluation* (available through the "ELL Companion Manual" link on the right column of the Web page above) provides assessment and eligibility determination guidelines to special education professionals. These guidelines can be used where traditional evaluation procedures may not be appropriate. The guidelines reflect a broad view of connections between ELL programs and special education. The manual's conclusions are based on such aspects of diversity as race, culture, the acculturation process, high mobility among families, and poverty rates.

# 2010 Calendar

## October 14–17

### Division for Early Childhood (DEC) 26th Annual International Conference on Young Children with Special Needs and Their Families

This DEC conference will disseminate effective practices that result in better outcomes for young children with disabilities, their families, and the personnel who serve them. The event is designed for family members of children with disabilities and the personnel who work with them. Kansas City, MO. Contact 406-543-0872 or [dec@dec-sped.org](mailto:dec@dec-sped.org); or go to [www.dec-sped.org/Conference](http://www.dec-sped.org/Conference).

## October 28–30

### Seventeenth National Forum on Character Education

This national conference is sponsored by the Character Education Partnership and features keynote speakers Sandra Day O'Connor and Dr. Hal Urban. The conference will focus on current research in character education, the effect of character education on efforts to permanently change school culture and climate, and support for at-risk students. The event also includes pre-forum workshops (addressing such subjects as "The Neurology of Performance" and "Optimizing the High School Experience"), more than 70 breakout sessions, hot-topic discussions led by experts, tours and school-site visits, and opportunities to network with colleagues and experts. The event is designed for anyone interested in character education. San Francisco, CA. Contact Becky Sipos at [rsipos@character.org](mailto:rsipos@character.org), 202-296-7743; or go to [www.character.org/2010forum](http://www.character.org/2010forum).

## November 11–13

### Pathways to Wellness, Healthy Minds, and Resilience

This 22nd Annual International Convention for Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is designed for family

members, physicians, psychologists, educators, health care providers, and social workers who want the most current, science-based information about ADHD. Atlanta, GA. Contact 301-306-7070, [conference@cbadd.org](mailto:conference@cbadd.org) or [CHADD.conference@cbadd.org](http://CHADD.conference@cbadd.org); or go to [www.cbadd.org](http://www.cbadd.org).

## November 14–16

### Secondary Transition Symposium: Blueprint for Success

This symposium, sponsored by the California Community of Practice on Secondary Transition (CoP), is open to teachers, administrators, WorkAbility staff, transition specialists, service providers, student leaders, family members and care givers, and interagency and business partners. The event is designed as a forum for sharing professional activities, including educational practices and research-supported strategies for improving transition services for students with disabilities ages 16–22. Content strands include "School-based Learning Activities," "Career Preparation and Work-based Learning Activities," "Connecting Activities," "Family Involvement and

Supports," and more. Participants are encouraged to come as a team. Los Angeles, CA. For questions, contact Jill Larson ([jl Larson@cde.ca.gov](mailto:jl Larson@cde.ca.gov) or 916-327-0866); for registration, contact Karen Nichols ([knichols@cde.ca.gov](mailto:knichols@cde.ca.gov) or 916-323-2538). Or go to [www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sel/ac/cop2010.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sel/ac/cop2010.asp) for more information.

## December 8–9

### Adolescent Literacy: Equity and Opportunity for All

Sponsored by the California Department of Education, this Secondary Literacy Summit X highlight best practices for improving adolescent literacy achievement, with a focus on reading, academic vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and content literacy. Sessions will also address the Common Core Standards, response to intervention (RtI), and instructional strategies for closing the achievement gap for English learners and students with special needs. Costa Mesa, CA. For more information, contact Sharon Johnson at 916-323-6269 or [sbjohnson@cde.ca.gov](mailto:sbjohnson@cde.ca.gov). Or go to [www.cacomp.center.org/cs/caccl/print/htdocs/caccl/secondaryliteracy.htm](http://www.cacomp.center.org/cs/caccl/print/htdocs/caccl/secondaryliteracy.htm).

## Mail this in . . . for your free subscription to *The Special EDge*

Subscription Request	<input type="checkbox"/> New subscription	<input type="checkbox"/> Address change	<input type="checkbox"/> Unsubscribe
	<input type="checkbox"/> E-subscription: <i>The Special EDge</i> will be e-mailed to you as a PDF		
Position	<input type="checkbox"/> School administrator	<input type="checkbox"/> Educator	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Family member	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	
Mailing Address	Name _____		
	School/Organization _____		
	Address _____		
	City/State/Zip _____		
	E-mail Address _____		
Other Interests	<input type="checkbox"/> Online courses	<input type="checkbox"/> Workshops and training	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Educational consulting	
Mail To	California Services for Technical Assistance and Training (CalSTAT) c/o Napa County Office of Education 5789 State Farm Drive, Suite 230 Rohnert Park, CA 94928 707-849-2275		



## Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

**T**he Civil Rights Act became law nearly 50 years ago, but there are still abundant sources of inequity related to race in our nation's educational system, according to educator Jonathon Kozol.<sup>1</sup> One of these sources involves the disproportionate representation of certain ethnic minorities in special education.

Researchers have studied this disproportionality for decades and posit numerous and conflicting reasons for its persistence. One solution, however, has earned strong support from researchers and educators alike: directly instructing general educators in how to successfully teach children from diverse backgrounds. This amounts to creating “culturally responsive classrooms and schools, [where] effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, California's State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell launched an initiative to address educational inequities and close “the persistent achievement gap between our highest- and lowest-performing students.” According to O'Connell, that achievement gap “has left our students of color, poor students, our English learners and students with disabilities lagging behind their white and Asian peers.” Later that year O'Connell charged his California P-16 Council

Napa County Office of Education  
California Services for Technical Assistance and Training  
5789 State Farm Drive, Suite 230  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928-3609

PRSR STD  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit No. 470  
Santa Rosa, CA

“to develop, implement, and sustain a specific, ambitious plan that holds the State of California accountable for creating the conditions necessary for closing the achievement gap.” The council emerged with 14 recommendations—among them, providing culturally relevant professional development for all school personnel. In short, helping teachers create classrooms that are “culturally responsive to the diverse racial, cultural backgrounds and needs of its student populations.”

Moving forward with this specific charge, staff members of the P-16 Division of the California Department of Education (CDE) realized that they were not the only ones struggling to help under-performing students. “We started working with colleagues in other CDE divisions—Curriculum and Instruction, Learning Support Services, and Special Education—to determine the nature of what we

needed,” says Dr. Shadidi Sia-Maat, Education Programs Consultant for the P-16 Division, and staffer for the California P-16 Council. “We all realized we can't do this work alone and knew there were very experienced folks across the country that could assist us.” So Dr. Sia-Maat and his colleagues convened an expert panel to help create a framework for culturally responsive professional development for teachers. The panel—which ultimately included such notables as Dr. Geneva Gay, (Professor of Education at the University of Washington-Seattle who, according to Sia-Maat, “wrote the bible on culturally responsive teaching”), Dr. Christine Sleeter (Professor Emerita in the College of Professional Studies at California State University Monterey Bay), and Dr. Joyce E. King, (Benjamin E. Mays Chair, Professor of Social Foundations

*Responsive, continued page 11*