



*Principals can accelerate  
learning for all students  
by supporting new  
teachers and adapting  
curricula and instruction  
to fit students' needs.*

# And Learning for All

**BY CHRISTINE MASON AND JESSA WEBBER**

**S**chools today are challenged as never before to demonstrate that *all* students are learning, and that learning for many subgroups is being accelerated, as demonstrated annually by students' scores on tests that measure their progress toward meeting state standards:

Each state, school district, and school will be expected to make adequate yearly progress toward meeting state standards. This progress will be measured for all students by sorting test results for students who are economically disadvantaged, from racial or ethnic minority groups, have disabilities, or have limited English proficiency. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002)

This message has become the drumbeat that is establishing the rhythm of expectations as schools search for ways to accelerate achievement, even as those schools wrestle with teacher and administrator shortages, antiquated equipment,

decaying buildings, an influx of students from other countries, and not only the expectations of IDEA '97 but also the uncertainty of what the reauthorization of IDEA will bring. While members of Congress are bemoaning the lack of adequate funding for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the administration is standing fast in its insistence that education is about more than funding.

Further, the importance of *equity* of instruction, assessment, and technology has been elevated. Because NCLB requires that progress be demonstrated for all students, “teaching to the middle” is no longer sufficient. Teachers are in need of strategies that are effective with *all* students—not an easy task, given the ever-increasing diversity found in U.S. schools. To assist principals in addressing equity concerns, these recommendations have been derived from several national projects that the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has assisted with over the past several years, including projects on curriculum access, secondary schools, and teacher mentoring.



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### **Skills of Effective Leaders**

CEC collaborated with the University of Minnesota on a three-year, federally funded project to examine schools that achieved excellent outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities (Bartholomay, Wallace, & Mason, 2001). For that project, we studied schools in Franklin, TN; Flagstaff, AZ; Miami, FL; and Brooklyn, NY. Results from these schools demonstrated that the most-effective administrators demonstrated significant skills in setting the direction of the school, as well as in:

- Helping the school shape a vision for its future that represented a “stretch” and was inclusive of all students.
- Fostering collaboration among general and special educators and other school specialists.
- Attracting the most-qualified teacher candidates by using a selective screening process to hire those who met the needs of the school.
- Making a significant effort to support teachers in their staff development. (For example, a principal in Tennessee drove teachers to visit innovative schools in Delaware.)

- Setting the expectation that teachers will collaborate and communicate with their peers on a consistent basis.
- Reaching out to pull the community into the school and knowing the value of strong parental and community support for innovations.
- Leading the school in carefully examining data and using it to implement strategies for continuous improvement. In the four schools we studied, administrators worked with teachers to review the schools’ annual progress and to set new goals each year.

### **Supporting New Teachers**

The success of students is predicated on the success of teachers. Several studies have demonstrated that well-trained teachers are the biggest variable affecting student achievement. Considering the teacher shortage that exists today, it is becoming ever more important to implement strategies that attract the best and brightest and also retain good teachers. Problems with the retention of special educators are exacerbated by feelings of isolation, particularly among



beginning special educators (Kozleski, Mainzer, & Deshler, 2000). If principals are not involved with special education in their schools, this feeling of isolation is increased, and the resultant perception of lack of support from administrators is one of the reasons most frequently mentioned for beginning teachers leaving the field (Whitaker, 2001).

Mentoring provides a way for the principal to collaborate with other teachers to get much-needed support to new teachers. Mentoring, as well as other informal supports within the school, seems to demonstrate significant promise for slowing the rate at which teachers leave the field (Billingsley, 2002; Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2002; Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2002). To develop guidelines for effectively mentoring new teachers, CEC reviewed the implementation of effective mentoring for new teachers at seven sites around the United States (Akron, OH; Las Vegas, NV; Tampa, FL; Fulton County [Atlanta], GA; Salt Lake City, UT; Little Rock, AR; and Baldwin County, AL [Mason & White, in press]).

New teachers and mentors at these sites indicated that the “support of the building principal” was important to the success of new teachers. Although the project focused on mentoring for new special educators, the results are supported by recent research in general education (Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2002). When principals and schools implement effective mentor induction program, they tend to see:

- Increased retention rates for new teachers
- Renewed practice for veteran teachers
- A growing sense of professionalism in the school
- Improved relationships with parents
- A greater sense of community among teachers in the school
- Expanded leadership roles of teachers in the school.

From that project, CEC developed guidelines for implementing mentoring in special education and described the role and responsibilities of school administrators. Included were the following recommendations for principals:

- Attend orientation session on mentoring implementation
- Provide released time for beginning teachers and mentors to observe and conference with one another
- Observe and facilitate mentoring relationship
- Nominate only master teachers as mentors
- Offer to reduce responsibilities of beginning teachers
- Offer to reduce responsibilities of mentors
- Participate in evaluation of program.

### **Curriculum and Technology Supports**

One of the most promising ways for increasing student access to and progress in the general education curriculum is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Based on the principle of eliminating barriers to physical access that was derived from the Civil Rights movement for persons with disabilities and the Americans with Disabilities Act, UDL shows great promise for accelerating student learning and reducing the numbers and types of modifications teachers make as they

differentiate instruction. With UDL, many of the modifications and curriculum enhancements that teachers are accustomed to making are built into the curriculum and instructional materials. This means that instead of spending hours adapting materials, teachers can focus on how to make the instruction most meaningful. For example, a student who is blind can download digital materials to develop a Braille version or use the computer to read a large print version of the text or classroom handouts. Similar strategies may be very useful for students with reading disorders or language limitations.

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), an educational not-for-profit organization in Massachusetts, has been involved in designing UDL materials and conducting research and providing technical assistance regarding their use. CEC, as part of the National Center on Accessing the Curriculum (NCAC), a project operated by CAST, has assisted in providing updates to general and special educators regarding curriculum access. Some of the materials that we believe may be of greatest interest to general educators can be downloaded from [www.cast.org/ncac/index.cfm?i=2344](http://www.cast.org/ncac/index.cfm?i=2344).

One of the most recent initiatives from CAST and NCAC, which has broad implications for future accessibility, is the National File Format Initiative (CAST, 2002). This initiative is designed to develop standards for presenting digital materials to ensure that individuals with disabilities have ready access to digital materials. This access can be heightened, for example, by presenting versions of materials in XML rather than portable document format (pdf) and similar file formats that are not easily compatible with tools that increase access for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Donna Palley, a special education coordinator from Concord, NH, is one of the practitioners who has been involved in trying to operationalize UDL in school settings. According to Palley, “Universal Design for Learning has the best chance of really making a difference. It gives people a way to structure their curricula and classrooms and to work with kids’ individual needs” (CAST, 2000). Palley is training teachers in curriculum development groups that focus on UDL and encourage the use of UDL principles in classrooms.

### **Equity in Assessments**

IDEA '97 required that students with disabilities receive appropriate accommodations as they are being assessed and that these accommodations be indicated in the students’ individualized education programs. A wide range of accommodations may be appropriate, considering the individual needs of the students. States often list accepted accommodations on their websites, and the IDEA partnerships have developed materials that specifically address accommodations for students with significant disabilities (CEC, 2000).

CAST and NCAC are also interested in increasing accessibility to testing materials for students with disabilities. For

example, individuals with disabilities need to be able to access the digital version of materials and, in some cases, receive the opportunity to respond to a computerized version of the test. Martha Thurlow and her colleagues at the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) at the University of Minnesota have provided some guidance regarding accessibility and standardized assessments. According to NCEO, the complex format and design of learning assessments makes it difficult for students with and without learning needs. To meet the needs of the widest group of students possible, a properly designed assessment would include seven elements: inclusive assessment population; precisely defined constructs; accessible nonbiased items; the ability to be adapted to accommodations; simple, clear, intuitive instructions and procedures; maximum readability and comprehensibility; and maximum legibility (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002).

### Equity and the Future

Specific research-based practices, such as mentoring and UDL, offer specific approaches for both increasing supports to teachers and increasing the efficiency of student learning. Other research-based information has informed us of the strategies and practices the administrators can use to improve student outcomes. Of course these methodologies and technologies will continue to evolve as our research base evolves and our technological capability improves.

The few innovations described in this article represent only a few of the research-driven practices that are known to be effective. Others—such as peer-tutoring, reciprocal reading, mnemonic devices and learning strategies, and specific practices for increasing literacy skills—also add to our knowledge about how to improve student achievement for students with disabilities. Many of these methodologies are also effective with other students, including students with limited English proficiency or students at-risk for academic failure or behavioral problems. More information on many of these practices can be obtained from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education or from any of the research-based projects funded by the Research to Practice Division of the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education. Another resource that may be valuable for many administrators is *A Principal's Guide to Implementing IDEA* (Bateman & Bateman, 2001).

To provide leadership that results in equity for students, principals must be diligent in continually updating their knowledge regarding the most-effective teaching practices. To truly address equity, principals also need to assist teachers in implementing practices to meet the needs of specific populations of students, such as those in special education. As principals establish a climate of support and encourage professional development, they will send a strong message that they not only value the achievement of students with special needs but also back up that support in practical ways. **PL**

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