

Meeting 22 Summary
Roots, Reality, Reboot:
Transforming (Special) Education to Advance Equity and Learning

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***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly to inform dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. However, it does not contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the purpose of public consumption. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

The California Collaborative on District Reform convened for the 22nd time to explore themes of equity, access, and civil rights, which have permeated all of the group’s work but have become increasingly prominent in recent meetings. The meeting addressed the challenges and opportunities associated with special education through a historical lens (roots); an examination of current practice (reality); and improvements in classroom instruction, system supports, and state policy that can lead to more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning opportunities for all students (reboot). Throughout the two-day conversation, Collaborative members highlighted the ways in which race, class, and language inextricably connect with many issues surrounding special education, prompting one individual to comment, “In the Collaborative, it seems like we have been building to *this* conversation.” Ultimately, the meeting highlighted the essential point that effective education is about meeting the needs of *all* students by identifying their strengths and struggles and giving each child appropriate opportunities to experience success.

Roots: Understanding the History of Special Education

The meeting began with a brief review of special education history in the United States. Communities of advocates, extending many of the priorities and strategies developed during the civil rights movement to another class of underserved youth, began pushing for students with disabilities to gain access to mainstream public education. An exposé on the deplorable conditions in the Willowbrook State School in 1972 helped draw attention to these efforts and ultimately led to the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975. Parameters of inclusion in federal law have continued to expand over time, including the incorporation of students with disabilities into state assessments in 1997.

Moreover, special education law has shifted from an exclusive emphasis on inputs (decisions primarily related to funding and student identification) to increasingly address outputs (including educational opportunities and student outcomes). Districts are responsible for addressing both of these elements; the meeting conversation therefore paid particular attention to the district role.

Meeting participants noted both the universality and marginalization of special education. The topic can be intensely personal: multiple individuals, some as individuals with disabilities and others as parents of children with disabilities, shared their own experiences with special education processes and services. Because it affects people across lines of race, class, gender, and language, participants noted that special education often transcends politics and, as a result, is bipartisan in nature. At the same time, special education issues often receive attention outside the sphere of general education, and therefore often fly under the radar. The resulting lack of awareness can lead adults to make comments about students with disabilities that would never be tolerated for other groups of children.

Dialogue also highlighted some of the connections between educating English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities. Both groups have experienced the support of an advocacy community that has pushed for legal recognition and expanded rights. Both groups traditionally have received attention as a broad class of students yet feature intragroup diversity that leads to unique needs among individuals. Efforts to increase inclusion for both groups also have experienced backlash from well-intentioned parents and community members who seek to keep students in an environment where they are close to peers who share particular background characteristics. Given the Collaborative's longstanding attention to ELs as a lens for exploring issues of equity and access, the challenges and opportunities of educating ELs may be instructive for serving students with disabilities. At the same time, important differences exist. The diversity within special education is more pronounced than the differences that exist among language groups, and EL issues typically are much more partisan than issues in special education.

Reality: Examining Current Special Education Practice

Against the backdrop of special education history, the meeting turned to an examination of current practices in identifying, placing, and educating students with disabilities.

Exploring the Development of an Individualized Education Program

To help create a common frame for what special education decisions look like at the ground level, meeting participants broke into small groups to simulate the process of developing an individualized education program (IEP). The activity explored the case of a 6-year-old African American student who has performed well academically but whose behavioral problems have led the school to consider whether he should be identified to receive special

education services.¹ Each individual within the group played a specific role during the process (e.g., father, current teacher, principal, school psychologist), and each had received a dossier relevant to that character's relationship with, knowledge of, and perspectives on the child. Each group was charged with determining whether to identify the student as having an emotional disturbance (ED), as well as making a recommendation for that student's placement. Participants later noted how readily they slipped into assigned roles—responding as their “character” might in real life despite their sometimes extensive experience and knowledge of IEP processes.

Comments after the activity led to a robust discussion about the limitations and biases inherent in current IEP practices, especially when participants receive insufficient guidance for how to make the practices effective. First, the process itself creates little space for a comprehensive assessment of student needs. Although the structured conversation featured pro forma attention to the child's strengths, comments quickly shifted to problems with learning and behavior; these negative assessments dominated the activity. In addition, the process allows little space to think about the root causes behind a student's behavior. Instead, it leads adults to make decisions in response to symptoms and, as a result, may not effectively address the student's needs. The process also limits solutions to in-school interventions. Despite the significant amount of time that a student spends outside school and the various medical and social-emotional supports that exist beyond school walls, the traditional IEP process often fails to recognize or seek to integrate these supports.

The activity also highlighted gaps in system capacity to meet student needs. Individuals often lack the time to properly assess students; in the exercise, neither the school psychologist nor the social worker had sufficient time to develop a relationship with the child or understand his needs, due in large part to an overwhelming caseload. The activity also demonstrated that schools often fail to faithfully implement intervention plans, leading adults to attribute continued problems to the student rather than to adults who have not executed their own responsibilities. Adult follow-through may be particularly problematic in struggling schools, where teacher and leader turnover can undermine consistency in student interventions. Finally, meeting participants noted that teachers and leaders within the school often lack the knowledge and skills they need to diagnose and meet student needs.

Participants also described the ways in which power dynamics and interpersonal relationships can heavily influence the proceedings. The IEP process is inherently subjective. However, the lack of expertise in the meeting, combined with a demand for professional judgment, can lead to a reliance on the “expert” in the room, often a psychologist who has no clinical training and who has had limited interaction with the student. At the same time, conversations easily can turn personal and escalate into a blame game among adults rather than a productive exploration of student strengths and needs.

¹ This IEP activity featured the case of a real California student and the adults who participated in that child's IEP. All identifying information that could have revealed the identity of the student, his school, or his district was removed.

Finally, parents know their child best; yet, the dynamics of power and privilege often make parents feel intimidated, disempowered, and marginalized. Some meeting participants described the fear and powerlessness they felt when going through the IEP process with their own children; for parents without high levels of engagement or comfort with the public school system (including language barriers), these feelings can be even more overwhelming.

Finally, the conversations suggested that the IEP process has a bias toward special education identification. After adults in the room have come to agreement that a child has needs, they often see a label as necessary for providing support. According to one individual, “Often times, educators see special education as the only place to get help.” Another participant echoed this point of view, saying, “The delusion in special education is that the label is the only thing that will get services going.” Although identification often happens with good intentions, the result simply may be to place a child in another setting. Although some educators have started to experience success with reintegrating students into general education settings, many of the students never come back once placed in alternative environments. Moreover, IEP teams often apply a long-term label (with long-term implications) for what may be a short-term problem (e.g., an emotional response to a family break-up or tragedy). An ED diagnosis, for example, can prevent a student from joining the military later in life.

Exploring the Ways That Systems Perpetuate Disparate Opportunities and Student Outcomes

Conversation transitioned from the micro-level examination of special education identification and placement decisions to the macro-level examination of district practices that can undermine equity and access. The briefing binder provided to meeting participants highlighted some of the causes and consequences of the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse children in special education nationwide. As the meeting’s hosts, leaders from San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) shared their story as one example of how this disproportionality plays out at the local level.

District leaders characterized SFUSD as “a tale of two districts.” Overall student performance levels rank among the best in California and have earned the district a strong reputation in the local community and across the state. However, achievement gaps between general education and special education students are also among the biggest in the state; these gaps mirror the racial achievement gaps for the district’s African American and Latino students.

Furthermore, students of color and ELs are disproportionately identified as requiring special education services. Trends in SFUSD resemble the data nationwide: 20.5 percent of special education students in the district are African American, compared to 10.8 percent of the total student population. African American students are 8.8 times more likely to be classified as ED; one district leader commented that a white student exhibiting similar behaviors is more likely to be labeled as autistic. Special education therefore becomes an

area in which adult bias—conscious and unconscious—leads to inequitable opportunities for youth. As one meeting participant observed, “Race, class, and language are all tied together with the disproportionality and the subjectivity of the special education process.” The ED classification has additional consequences: students identified as ED are more likely to be placed in restrictive educational settings; they are also 25 times more likely to be suspended from school. In addition to these disparities, students with the greatest need for individual attention are often funneled to the schools with the least capacity to effectively address those needs.

In addition to concerns about student welfare and exclusion, special education decisions have enormous cost implications. The use of paraprofessionals, assignments to restrictive settings and private schools, transportation costs, and other supports or interventions demand more resources than special education funding streams can support. In SFUSD, one quarter of the *general education* fund goes toward students identified for special education services. Moreover, these costs continue to rise at an unsustainable level. As a result, special education becomes not only a moral priority for the district but a challenge that threatens its financial viability.

Despite these glaring challenges, many structural disincentives prevent schools from embracing more inclusive practices. Schools receive additional funding to serve students identified as having special education needs, including a small allocation delivered to schools as part of SFUSD’s weighted student formula for school funding. However, the money delivered through this weight is often insufficient to support the services students need, driving schools to try to limit the number of students with disabilities that they serve. In addition, the district struggles to develop more appropriate supports for students. The default approach to working with many students with disabilities is to bring a paraprofessional into the classroom who has no professional training in general education and little to no opportunity to coordinate support with the classroom teacher. However, moving away from this model has implications for people’s jobs and can be a scary proposition for adults in the system—for those people whose employment could be at stake and for classroom teachers who may perceive that supports are being taken away. In addition, pushback against inclusion can come from the parents of students with disabilities. The current system may not integrate these students well, but parents may want their children to receive the nurturing, individual attention that the smaller special education setting may provide and fear the loss of what they view as an essential safety net.

Understanding Why Traditional Instructional Practice Is At Odds With How the Brain Works

Coupled with system-level practices that perpetuate inequitable special education identification and placement, traditional approaches to instruction often fail to adapt to the wide range of learning styles within a classroom. David Rose, founder and chief education officer at the Center for Applied Special Technology, joined the Collaborative meeting to share insights from the field of neuroscience and implications for education.

Key Findings From Neuroscience

One of the core findings from brain study is that *all* individuals are unique. Educators often focus on a limited set of disabilities—for example, dyslexia or autism—in which the functions of a child’s brain impact his or her ability to interact in a traditional classroom setting. However, the characterization of these differences as “abnormal” may be misguided. All brains are different; our system of special education identification happens to pick up on differences that manifest themselves most visibly in a K–12 classroom. Instead, Rose explained, “Variability is what’s normative,” and more important, disability is relative.

Rose used the example of perfect pitch to illustrate the differences among individuals in the way our brains process information. Perfect pitch is the ability of a person to identify or recreate a given musical note without the benefit of a reference tone. The brains of individuals with perfect pitch look physically different than the brains of individuals without it: there are more connections between the neurons in the auditory cortex of the brain, the area where pitch is recognized. In many musical settings, perfect pitch can serve as an asset that helps an individual sing or play in tune, or identify notes for transcription purposes. In other settings, however, perfect pitch can become a disability. In a church with an organ that plays tones a half-step low, for example, most of the general population can match the pitch without trouble, whereas a person with perfect pitch will struggle to sing a note that shows up as an A in the sheet music but sounds as a different note entirely.

The example of perfect pitch provided a segue into one of the most important findings from neuroscience: the brain is malleable and changes by what we learn. With perfect pitch, people are born with a spectrum of likelihood for exhibiting that trait; it tends to manifest most frequently in an environment where music is present and valued and the brain has the opportunity to develop. Thus, a child’s environment has a tremendous impact on a child’s ability to learn. As Rose explained, “It’s really hard to change the brain genetically. It’s really easy to change it environmentally.” The implication for K–12 education is that children have natural strengths and weaknesses, but their brains have enormous capacity to grow and develop. It is therefore well within the power of the education system to improve students’ abilities to learn and succeed.

Problems With Educational Practice

Despite the variation among students and their abilities to expand knowledge and skills, many traditional educational interventions are at odds with how the brain works. Teachers often redirect a child struggling with reading, for example, toward simplified decoding exercises. Rather than expand the number of connections the brain makes by enabling it to simultaneously access complementary sources of information, this kind of redirection *limits* the number of connections the brain is making, often by forcing a child back to the exact kind of behaviors the child struggled with in the first place.

The result of these misapplied interventions is often disengagement and misbehavior. Rose described a dance class he attended with his wife where he and the three other men in the class struggled to master the dance steps they were learning. The instructor responded by

exposing them in front of the class and speaking in what Rose described as “baby talk” in an effort to simplify the material. Instead of improving, the four men spent most of the remainder of the class sessions goofing off in the back of the class. As Rose explained, “We didn’t plan to be that way. The environment made us that way. We weren’t getting support, so we needed to make it a social thing. We had to be successful at something. We had to show that it wasn’t important to us.” The same trend happens too often in classrooms: children struggle with content and skills, teachers respond with interventions that limit the children’s prospects of achieving success, and children respond with disruptive behavior.

In addition, many traditional approaches to educational intervention introduce stress that causes children’s brains to operate at suboptimal levels. Because of the wide variation in the way our brains operate, some students struggle with written text; when the students experience repeated failure, books eventually become a source of stress. Rose explained, “When we present text, it is a repeated trauma for some kids...Chronic stress puts kids in situations where we are damaging their central nervous systems.” When school systems narrow their curriculum, many students receive fewer opportunities to be successful because the curriculum caters primarily to those students who feel most comfortable with the limited content being delivered in school. The challenge for educators is to build environments that enable all students to experience success.

Reboot: Pursuing Improved Opportunities and Results for All Children

Having explored existing practices of special education identification and placement, district policies and supports, and classroom instruction, the group turned to the classroom and system levels and improvements that can produce optimal learning environments.

Expanding and Deepening Learning Opportunities Through Universal Design for Learning

Building on findings from neuroscience, the group examined instructional practices that can create expert learners among all children. If science tells us that variability is normal, educators must be prepared to understand and respond to key sources of variability.

Meeting discussion highlighted the point that educational approaches must be proactive to address the strengths and challenges among learners as well as the development within each learner. According to Rose, “The affective center of the brain is the engine of learning.” Therefore, any approach to learning needs to begin by interesting and engaging the learner. Agency and choice in the learning process help by enhancing relevance, value, and authenticity. As students learn content, they must also develop self-regulation, resilience, and grit—these are among the 21st century skills that the Collaborative has addressed in other recent meetings. Importantly, teachers must develop these skills in students before introducing threats that might otherwise cause the brain to shut down. In other words, educators should hold students to high expectations and challenge them to expand their knowledge and skills. However, teachers must do so in a developmentally appropriate way, in which students develop the ability to respond to challenges and failure before

encountering levels of stress that might otherwise impair the abilities of the students' brains to respond.

Consistent with this understanding of the developmental progression of learners, Benjamin Bloom's *Developing Talent in Young People* argues that a student needs three things in a teacher, and that he or she needs the right things at the right times. The first stage of teaching is to provide options for recruiting interest; the teacher's first role is to focus on affect and helping a student feel good about a subject. Teaching next needs to provide options for sustaining effort and persistence; the teacher next focuses on developing technique. Advanced stages of teaching provide options for self-regulation; to this end, finally, the teacher needs to be a "tyrant" who holds students to high expectations and demands excellence. The three phases can come from the same teacher or from different teachers. The broader point is that one of the goals in teaching students with disabilities is that every student needs to reach a stage where they have a "tyrant teacher." Too often, well-intentioned efforts to provide students with support can reinforce incredibly damaging low expectations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) describes an approach to instruction that responds to our understanding about how the brain works by providing multiple pathways for each learner to access content and experience success. The guidelines for UDL feature three components.² First, instruction should provide multiple means of representation. Second, instruction should provide multiple means of action and expression. Finally, instruction should provide multiple means of engagement. For all three components, technology can play an instrumental role in presenting material, demonstrating knowledge, and engaging in learning in multiple ways. Technology can also eliminate the content-irrelevant barriers to learning—for example, presenting content without using text to make the content accessible to struggling readers—while emphasizing the content-relevant skills and knowledge that students need.

Applying Lessons From UDL to District Practice

Building on conversations about the district role in special education and UDL, meeting participants raised several implications for district practice. Fundamental to this conversation was an emphasis on the necessary shift in mindset to seeing special education as a problem and a responsibility that reside at the system level. Systemic incentives and traditional practice often perpetuate inequities in identification and placement of students with disabilities. Just as important, however, the demands for improved instruction place the responsibility for establishing expectations and building capacity at the district level.

Leveraging the Power of Technology

Meeting participants also noted that the demands for technology infrastructure to embrace the principles of UDL are substantial. The kind of instruction espoused by UDL will require more devices and bandwidth than most schools currently have. At the same time, simply

² For a complete set of resources related to UDL, refer to www.udlcenter.org.

providing technology will not change practices; educators must learn how to integrate new tools in ways that enhance instruction and student learning. Currently, school systems may be the biggest barriers to this change; students are often more technologically savvy than the adults running schools and districts, and restrictions on access can unnecessarily limit classroom exposure to valuable resources. As one individual observed, “We are really talking about adult paradigm shift rather than children’s paradigm shift.”

For all the advantages that technology offers, meeting participants also cautioned against the dangers associated with technology use. The promise of online learning could tempt parents and educators to seek more “individualized” learning options that in fact limit the means of content representation, take a classroom teacher entirely out of the picture, and remove the opportunity for children to interact with and learn socially with their peers. Some online learning providers are going so far as to ask parents to waive their legal disability rights. Thus, online learning could become a modern form of warehousing that the entire special education movement emerged to prevent.

Integrating UDL Into Existing Supports

A temptation exists with a clearly defined approach to serving children (like UDL) to discard existing practices and change course with policies and behaviors. Meeting participants emphasized, however, that UDL is really a description of what high-quality instruction should look like for all children. Practices of response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) that are already under way in many districts seek to identify and meet each student’s learning needs and can be consistent with UDL when implemented well.

In SFUSD, strategic efforts to improve services to students with disabilities involve a multi-tiered system of intervention supports. Tier 1 features a menu of culturally relevant supports for all students that include schoolwide PBIS, the Good Behavior Game, and proactive classroom management. Tier 2 features a menu of default supports for some students (10–25 percent), with small-group and individual supports that might include behavioral contracting, mentor-based programs, and positive peer reporting. Finally, Tier 3 features a menu of individual supports for a few students (3–5 percent) that might include replacement behavior training, cognitive behavior therapy, and home and community supports. The principles of UDL apply to all levels of support, and the multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement might help provide options for success.

Building Adult Capacity

Meeting participants also acknowledged the tremendous demands on human capital and capacity building implied by a movement to practices consistent with UDL. Teachers must first excel at meeting the current expectations for classroom teaching, which remains a challenge for most districts already. Then, teachers need to recognize and address the learning needs of *all* students, including those who have been traditionally excluded from general education classrooms. In order to do this, teachers should teach and assess students using multiple mediums and modes of representation and expression. Finally, districts are asking teachers to embrace all of these responsibilities at the same time they

are taking on other major challenges, such as implementation of the Common Core State Standards.³ All of these changes potentially come at a time when districts are looking to move away from paraprofessional supports as the default option for special education intervention—which, although the supports may be suboptimally effective, teachers often see as an important safety net that enables them to manage their classrooms.

If school systems hope for teachers to rise to these expectations, districts must bear the responsibility for building teacher capacity. Districts must create opportunities for teachers to develop the knowledge and skills to teach effectively, especially if districts seek to transition away from traditional student intervention. Teacher training programs must also prepare teachers to recognize and address the learning needs of all students.

Leveraging the District Role for Broader Improvements in Special Education

Beyond the application of UDL principles to district practice, meeting conversation also addressed the role of districts in changing special education practices to better address individual student needs.

Considering Special Education as Part of the Overall District Mission

Throughout the two-day meeting, participants reiterated the central point that conversations about special education are merely a lens into the broader responsibility of districts to meet all student needs. All students have unique needs; some of the students happen to be identified and addressed through the special education system. Regardless of student identification, districts must find ways to help all students experience success. Special education becomes a critical focal point in this effort, in part because many students require additional resources and supports but in particular because current identification and placement practices subjectively and disproportionately exclude particular groups of students from high-quality educational experiences. As one individual observed, “This isn’t a special ed issue. This is a social justice issue.”

Meeting participants also observed that preparing students for society and civic participation should be a goal of our K–12 education systems. The multiple means of representation and expression espoused in UDL are not just about creating more ways for students to experience success; variety is essential to a vibrant culture and society. Moreover, practices of inclusion are important not only because they provide equitable opportunities for students who would otherwise be excluded; exposure to diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and disabilities is critical to developing empathy, a trait that participants described as an invaluable element of fully participating in society.

³ Making reference to David Coleman’s guidance that students should have an opportunity to struggle with text in order to meet the expectations of the Common Core State Standards, participants noted the potential tension between providing scaffolding (as UDL promotes) and enabling students to struggle with content. The point of UDL is not to cut off students from struggling with content; the point, as Rose explained, is to give them multiple paths to get to that struggle.

Developing Internal Structures and Signals of Commitment

Meeting participants emphasized the importance of senior district leadership in shining the light on special education issues and making them a priority. District leaders from SFUSD shared some of the early steps they have taken to position the district to manage special education issues in a more equitable way. These efforts began at the very top, with a commitment to enhancing services for students with disabilities. SFUSD's Board-adopted Guiding Principles Regarding Inclusive Education Practice embrace a shared responsibility to meet all student needs: "Students requiring special education services are, first and foremost, general education students who need additional services and support in order to succeed in school. Their success, therefore, is the joint responsibility of all SFUSD educators." The district has built on this overarching policy by developing a strategic plan for serving students with disabilities and has reorganized the department to better meet the district's goals.

Framing the Special Education Conversation

Moving toward more equitable identification, placement, and instruction introduces change for many of the adults in K-12 education systems. As districts seek shifts in culture and practice, careful messaging is important to offset misinformation and lack of expertise. First, communication needs to acknowledge and protect the humanity of children. Language about students with disabilities must be accurate and respectful; adults must therefore make a conscious effort to transition away from loaded terminology, such as "inclusion student" and "encroachment."

Messaging is also likely to be more effective when it communicates respect for the adults in the system. Teachers face increased expectations and, at the same time, might have the perception that resources and supports are being taken away from classrooms and schools. District leaders must acknowledge and attempt to counteract these perceptions; an effective systemic approach is not one that removes supports, but that establishes a stronger system of supports than the approach that currently exists. Framing district efforts in terms of building capacity—especially related to providing teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful—can help.

Participants also described the power in being concrete in their communication. For example, SFUSD administers an A-G diploma that requires students to complete the A-G requirements for University of California/California State University admission in order to graduate from high school. Given the six-period high school day, students identified for pull-out supports through their IEPs will not have an opportunity to complete A-G requirements by the end of 12th grade. Sharing this information directly with parents helped district leaders communicate the direct implications of identification and placement decisions. As district leaders seek changes, specific language about how things will look at the district level, within classrooms, and in terms of student performance can alleviate fears and help stakeholders at all levels of the system understand the nature and implications of these changes.

Finally, meeting participants suggested that districts can play an important role in identifying and sharing early successes. District leaders face difficult decisions when determining how best to move to scale. Immediate movement toward system-wide change can respond to the urgent needs of students across a district but encounter challenges in achieving early success in all schools. Alternately, moving deliberately with more targeted efforts can make challenges more manageable and allow for refinement before expansion but might delay the timeline for system-wide improvement. However district leaders choose to move forward, there are likely to be schools that embrace the moral imperative to meet student needs first and achieve early successes in adapting their supports for kids. Publicizing these “all-star schools” as they emerge can help provide evidence of viability, build stakeholder buy-in to new efforts, and demonstrate to other schools what success looks like.

Navigating Political Dynamics

Connected to issues of messaging, meeting conversation acknowledged the political dynamics that emerge around special education. Joint commitment from the district central office and board of education can be powerful in sustaining change efforts, as well as providing political cover for individuals to speak frankly about student needs in the district. Challenges remain, however. Opportunities may exist to leverage social services and community partners to provide more comprehensive supports to students, but those partners need to be willing to align to what the district is trying to do and embrace accountability for results. Navigating the parameters of collaboration can be difficult, but districts can play an important role in driving the conversation in the right direction, rather than acting as a passive recipient of support from municipal organizations. In addition, labor relationships often revolve around the preservation of jobs, and transitions away from traditional means of providing support (e.g., the extensive use of paraprofessionals) are difficult when adults’ jobs are at stake.

Developing Strong Relationships

All of the changes implied by more inclusive and child-centered classroom practices are predicated on the development of strong relationships at all levels. UDL requires a strong relationship between a teacher and student so that a teacher can effectively diagnose and address a student’s strengths and learning needs. This relationship is also critical to recognizing the student’s developmental trajectory and determining when the appropriate role of the teacher is to serve as a nurturer or a tyrant.

New expectations for teaching also demand strong relationships between district leaders and teachers. Just as a teacher needs to decide what is appropriate for each student at a given moment, district leaders need to scaffold changing expectations and supports according to what is most appropriate for teachers and schools at a given point in time. Furthermore, changes in expectations often include negotiation with labor unions, and orienting conversations around student needs in the face of concern about adult job security requires strong professional connections among adult leaders.

Finally, as districts seek to adopt more inclusive practices and develop more comprehensive supports, leaders will need to foster strong connections with families and community organizations.

Harnessing the Power and Recognizing the Limitations of Data

As districts look to acknowledge and address problems of disproportionality and equity, data on special education identification, placement, and student outcomes (combined with student background characteristics) can play an important role in exposing troubling practices and setting the table for conversation. Indeed, many district-level efforts begin by exposing disparities in special education services and student outcomes among student subgroups. Meeting participants emphasized, however, that because classification for many disabilities is a subjective decision to begin with, many data points related to special education are subjective and can be manipulated. Moreover, systemic problems underlying many troubling student outcomes can often be obscured by data. Conversation therefore advocated for the role of data as a foundation for engaging in a more expansive conversation about how to best meet student needs.

Instructional practices that embrace the principles of UDL also pose challenges for data use. Teachers are increasingly turning to evidence of student learning in classrooms to identify student needs and guide instructional practice. However, student work that features multiple means of action and expression may not always align with traditional assessment methods, and challenges of comparability exist in cases where students use different paths.

Identifying Opportunities for Success

The challenges posed by transitions to improved policies and instructional practices are daunting. Nevertheless, meeting participants identified some opportunities for success. Districts can leverage professional learning communities as powerful vehicles for collaboration and capacity building. District leaders might also capitalize on teacher perspectives regarding expectations for their classroom practice. The notions of autonomy and choice implied by UDL move in a direction that many teachers are likely to embrace, and which pressures to narrow their curriculum in the service of standardized test results have constrained in recent years. Highlighting the opportunities to exercise professional judgment in the classroom and aligning new expectations to implementation of the Common Core State Standards can help build teacher support for new approaches to instruction.

Improving State Policy to Better Address Student Needs

Widening the lens beyond classroom- and district-specific considerations, meeting conversation also addressed issues of state education policy, with regard to special education issues and to the recently passed Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

State Special Education Policy

The increased teacher capacity required for more inclusive and individualized classroom practice has implications not only for district leaders, but for teacher preparation. However, current pre-service training does little to prepare teaching candidates to teach

students with disabilities. The California State University system requires a single class on special education for general education teaching candidates, and the textbook for that class addresses UDL in only a single chapter. As a result, teachers are often ill equipped to embrace classroom instruction for all students that employs the principles of UDL. In addition, credentialing parameters can present a barrier to most effectively integrating and reaching students with disabilities. Meeting participants suggested that state policy should focus on current restrictions on where teachers with various credentials can teach, as well as the challenge of attracting strong teaching candidates into special education when current regulations require them to complete two years of coursework.

Conversation also addressed implications for state assessment programs. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), as a condition of receiving federal funding, is designing its summative assessment system to be accessible to students with disabilities. Meeting participants remarked that this development represents an important step forward in incorporating students with disabilities into K–12 education, because it is the first time that accessibility accommodations have been done concurrently with assessment development rather than being retrofitted to an existing test. Nevertheless, meeting participants suggested that educators and policymakers have paid insufficient attention to a replacement for the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA), which was created for students with severe cognitive disabilities. These individuals remarked that the CAPA has been overused in practice and that the SBAC system hopefully will encourage districts to test more students through the primary state summative assessment. Nevertheless, an assessment like CAPA plays an important role, and California still needs to address the assessment needs of the 2 percent of students for whom CAPA was created.

Finally, meeting participants suggested that state policy should address issues of parent engagement. Echoing themes that emerged during the IEP discussion earlier in the meeting, one individual remarked, “Parents are the most invested and the least powerful in this process.” At the same time, parents are often grateful for the individual attention and safety nets that the current system provides and often oppose the removal of those supports. Parents therefore need to visualize what a better system looks like and what role they can and should play in advocating for improved learning opportunities for their children. Just as district leaders can draw attention to important issues and shine a light on early successes, policymakers can play a role in advocating and creating the conditions for parent involvement that supports equity efforts.

Despite these opportunities for clarifying or improving special education policy, the California state role in moving changes forward is unclear. Everything with which the State Board of Education is currently involved is compliance based, yet the Board has no policy-generating capacity to redefine the conversation or establish parameters that can facilitate improved special education practice. A task force on special education, currently getting under way, will seek to provide actionable recommendations to policymakers at the state level; the observations from this meeting and from stakeholders around the state can help provide guidance for what the task force should study.

Local Control Funding Formula

Meeting 22 gave the group an opportunity to reflect on the success of a policy issue with which the California Collaborative has been actively engaged: the passage of LCFF. As districts embrace the expectations and opportunities associated with a new resource allocation system, the local focus will turn to issues of policy implementation. LCFF asks districts to engage the local community in developing plans that serve the overall district strategies for improvement while ensuring that dollars generated by low-income, EL, and foster students will go to serve those students. At this point, many questions remain. For example, how should districts approach the requirements for community engagement in the development of spending plans under LCFF? The Collaborative will consider how to most effectively engage with these questions and issues as the policy and implementation processes unfold.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

Collaborative staff are preparing to release two publications: the first publication identifies lessons learned from Collaborative districts from Tier 3 categorical flexibility and from districts employing a weighted pupil formula at the local level that might inform the work of other districts as they embrace the flexibility afforded through LCFF. The second publication builds on a request that emerged from the Collaborative's meeting in Garden Grove in March 2011 and seeks to articulate that district's comprehensive approach to human capital development. We expect to release both publications later this summer. The date, location, and topic of the next Collaborative meeting have yet to be determined, but we anticipate that Meeting 23 will be held in late fall. In the meantime, for ongoing information about the Collaborative, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information about upcoming events, please visit our website at www.cacollaborative.org.