

# **School Reform: Opportunities for Excellence and Equity for Individuals with Learning Disabilities- A Special Report**

By: National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1991)

The newly articulated goals for education in the United States, many of which are set forth in America 2000: An Education Strategy, cannot be achieved without important school reform. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) joins with others in calling for school reform and for the development of strategies to improve education. The NJCLD urges that the needs of students at risk for school failure, including those with learning disabilities, be addressed when setting new goals, policies, and practices. This is essential if schools are to meet the diverse learning needs of these students, optimize their achievement, and ensure effective educational outcomes. To ignore the abilities and potentially rich contributions of students with learning disabilities will create imbalance and inequity within the educational system, restrict the quality of life for individuals, and diminish the nation's competitive status within a global economy.

The NJCLD cautions that professionals and parents must be aware of the goals of school reform and restructuring if they are to participate in the development of new initiatives that achieve a balance between excellence and equity. The intent of this special report is to stimulate thought and discussion about reform initiatives and positive action on behalf of individuals with learning disabilities. The purposes of this report are

1. to identify important components of the reform movement and explore their implications for individuals with learning disabilities, and
2. to encourage active participation by professionals and parents in the reform process by suggesting questions that must be addressed if the needs of all students are to be met.

The NJCLD has identified eight components that must be considered when addressing issues of school reform and developing strategies to improve education: (a) academic standards and student achievement, (b) curriculum and instruction, (c) accountability and evaluation, (d) school and classroom organization, (e) locus of decision making, (f) choice, (g) school finance, and (h) personnel preparation.

## **Academic standards and student achievement**

Higher academic standards and more demanding and uniform expectations for student performance are major goals of the reform movement. Program initiatives include increased graduation requirements, national testing programs, additional course work and

homework, strict adherence to grade retention policies, and the use of differential diplomas.

Although higher academic expectations is a worthy goal for America's students, more demanding and uniform standards will pose several problems for students with learning disabilities and those responsible for their education. First, because a large number of students will fail to meet the higher academic requirements, there will likely be an inordinate increase in the number of students identified as having learning disabilities. Second, as schools and school personnel are judged largely on the ability of their students to meet uniform standards, the development of a variety of curricular options and instructional strategies may be less likely. Third, the large percentage of students with learning disabilities who are unable to meet higher academic standards will be at risk for dropping out of school. Finally, for those students with learning disabilities who remain in school, the development of rigid standards will keep many from becoming eligible for postsecondary programs and give them fewer opportunities as adults.

### **Questions to consider**

- What educational options are available to students who do not or cannot meet uniform standards?
- Are there policies that allow school personnel to adjust standards on behalf of students with learning disabilities in an equitable way?
- What policies and procedures exist to encourage and assist students who do not meet uniform standards to stay in school?
- To what extent are teachers prepared and permitted to modify learning goals and design individual instructional approaches that will meet the needs of student with learning disabilities?
- Are homework policies and assignments appropriate for individual students?
- How do schools and families address students' needs to become responsible for their own learning and develop other skills not commonly measured by tests of school achievement?
- Do schools have a reasonable policy for promotion and retention of students, and are decisions about promotion or retention based on thoughtful consideration of the individual student's needs?
- What are the criteria for granting diplomas to students with learning disabilities who have difficulty meeting uniform standards?
- Do school personnel make realistic recommendations that facilitate transition to postsecondary schooling or employment?

### **Curriculum and instruction**

School reform movements often focus on restructuring curriculum and instruction, particularly by establishing uniformity. Given this focus a danger exists that curricular options vital to the successful achievement of students with learning disabilities may not be available to them. This is especially true as uniform standards are established and implemented. The desire to include all students within regular education should not

overshadow the fact that some students with learning disabilities need to learn different content in different ways. When standards focus on learning discrete facts, the goals and types of instruction available for students with learning disabilities are limited. For example, exclusive focus on scholastic achievement will not meet the needs of students with learning disabilities must be taught to function independently, or be prepared for direct entrance into the work force. As academic standards are increased there will likely be a concurrent increase in the development of instructional and service delivery models. It is vital that these new models incorporate instructional approaches and service delivery systems that have been researched and validated with students who have learning disabilities. Such approaches and systems include both effective teaching practices and appropriate support services.

### **Questions to consider**

- Do the planning, design, and implementation of curricular programs and instructional strategies reflect an understanding of what learning disabilities are and how such disabilities affect the way individuals learn?
- Are different curricular options and instructional strategies available to serve individuals with different types of learning disabilities and degrees of severity?
- Are curricular continuity and transition planning a part of educational programs?
- Does the curriculum include content related to the acquisition of effective and efficient learning strategies?
- Does the administration provide the resources to support and foster the use of a variety of curricular options and instructional strategies?

## **Accountability and evaluation**

One assumption of the school reform movement is that greater accountability can be achieved by systematically supervising and monitoring the performance of all students. There is a danger that as schools are held accountable for higher academic standards, inappropriate emphasis will be given to the results of such measures as national achievement tests or "report cards." Reliance on such measures may not permit evaluation of program effectiveness for students with learning disabilities.

### **Questions to consider**

- Are the design and content of tests and the testing process appropriate to measure the educational progress of students with learning disabilities?
- What broader assessment systems can be used to evaluate the progress of students with learning disabilities and therefore to serve as additional indices of school accountability?

## **School and Classroom Organization**

Organizational designs that stem from school reform efforts do not necessarily address federal requirements (i.e., P.L. 94-142) for providing a full continuum of specialized and related services. For example, although consultation and collaboration are effective approaches for enhancing services to students with learning disabilities, there is a danger that they will be used as substitutes for a full continuum of educational placement options.

Grouping students by ability and increasing the time students spend in school without providing appropriate academic supports will not enhance excellence or equity for students with learning disabilities. Teachers must be encouraged to use a variety of effective grouping strategies; otherwise, students with learning disabilities may assume passive roles in groups or may be unable to participate in appropriate ways. Students with learning disabilities may not benefit from extended school programs unless individualized approaches and modifications are offered.

### **Questions to consider**

- Are the needs of students with learning disabilities considered in decisions about grouping?
- Are different groupings used to address different instructional goals?
- Are regular and special education teachers, related service personnel, parents, and students involved in school building decisions about grouping?
- Are communities aware of the full implications of extending the length of school programs?
- Do the design and implementation of service delivery options reflect an understanding of what learning disabilities are and what implications they have for appropriate services?
- Does the administration promote and support a variety of service delivery options?
- Is time provided for collaborative planning?

## **Locus of Decision Making**

School reform proposals often include recommendations for a shift | in the locus of decision making. Several concerns emerge in connection with such strategies as school-based management, teacher empowerment, and increased parent involvement. Potential exists for inequity in programs and services from building to building. The| expertise that is needed for ongoing program development and evaluation, as well as teacher supervision and evaluation, may not exist at the school level. Some building-level administrators are unfamiliar either with the needs of individuals with learning disabilities or with ways of meeting these needs. Similarly, some regular classroom teachers may not know what the needs of individuals with learning disabilities are and how to manage diversity within the classroom.

Special education and related service personnel and community members with disabilities (consumers) may not be included in the decision-making process at the building level. In

addition, schools may involve parents at a superficial level yet not include them in the actual decision-making process. Even given the opportunity to share in decision making, parents, school personnel, and community members may not have the skills they need for full participation.

### **Questions to consider**

- Do parents, professional personnel, and community members have a meaningful role in local decision-making processes?
- How do schools prepare parents and community members to participate as partners in the decision-making process?
- Are individuals with disabilities involved in the local decision-making processes?
- Are programs, services, resources, and curricular opportunities equitable among local schools?
- Do school personnel have the expertise to make decisions about educational needs of individuals with learning disabilities?
- Does each school have adequate program supervision and evaluation?
- Are special education and related service personnel involved in developing accountability systems, designing programs and services, and participating in other activities at the local level?

## **Choice**

The concept of parental choice is intended to allow parents to choose the school that their children will attend. It is often assumed that parental choice will stimulate excellence in educational practice. However, parental choice may have unforeseen consequences for students with learning disabilities in that they may be neglected and placed in weakened and underfunded public schools.

### **Questions to consider**

- What educational opportunities are available to students with learning disabilities under a choice-driven system?
- What constraints will students experience because of their unique needs?
- Will nonpublic schools be obligated to provide appropriate individualized educational services for students with learning disabilities?
- Who will monitor the consequences and influences of choice-driven systems on students with learning disabilities?
- Will added costs for transportation and administration prevent or interfere with choices for students?

## **School Finances**

School reform and school finances are inextricably related. Thus, national determination of school reform must be coupled with a careful evaluation of educational funding. The

lack of consistency in efforts to improve education can be understood, in part, as being directly related to variations in federal and state supports and provisions.

Whatever financial system is used in educational funding, it must provide for the equitable education of students with learning disabilities. For example, voucher systems must ensure that necessary funds and resources will be available for students with learning disabilities. Similarly, when local schools are responsible for total financial management, equity in fund allocation must be ensured for these students.

### **Questions to consider**

- How will the school reform movement influence the availability of funds for students with special needs?
- With a decrease in available general revenue, will dollars be used for regular education to the exclusion of special education?
- If equal amounts of money are allocated per student, are all students served equitably?
- How will equity be ensured in the application of new school finance procedures?
- How will block grants influence the availability of funds for students with special needs?
- If regular and special education dollars are commingled, how will services to students with special needs be affected?
- Is the placement of students in regular education a device to reduce spending for special education, or is it in the best interests of children?

## **Personnel Preparation**

Well-prepared administrators, teachers, and related service personnel are fundamental to school improvement. The competencies they need include sufficient depth of knowledge in the content areas, ability to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of students, and thorough appreciation of teaching and classroom management strategies. If personnel preparation programs focus only on content mastery, the result will be personnel who are not prepared to work collaboratively or provide appropriate individualized instruction for students using a variety of service delivery systems.

School reform may result in students with learning disabilities being placed in the regular classroom for the entire school day. If so, administrators, teachers, and related service personnel must be trained to meet these students' specific educational needs. Therefore, effective school reform must include provisions to enable practicing teachers and other personnel to renew and refine their professional skills as needed.

### **Questions to consider**

- How do reform initiatives address preservice and inservice preparation programs for school personnel?

- How are professionals prepared to understand the nature of learning disabilities and the manner in which different disabilities affect how individuals learn?
- To what extent do personnel preparation programs prepare teachers, administrators, and related service personnel to provide accommodations for students with special needs in the regular classroom?
- To what extent are school personnel prepared and able to use different instructional approaches that meet the individual needs of students with learning disabilities?
- How are related service personnel trained to fulfill their changing roles in educational settings?
- Do institutions of higher education maintain effective criteria for personnel preparation programs?
- Are practica and field experiences interdisciplinary in nature, and are they designed to promote collaboration?
- Are needs assessment data used to develop inservice programs?
- How is an interdisciplinary, collaborative perspective maintained in the design and implementation of service programs?

## Conclusion

The school reform movement may adversely affect students with learning disabilities unless parents and professionals respond to its initiatives. These students may be ignored, and their needs unacknowledged, as the initiatives of the reform movement are planned and implemented. As a consequence, these students will become part of a larger group of students who are taught without regard for their individual needs.

Therefore, educators and parents cannot ignore the reform movement; in fact, they must provide leadership at national, state, and local levels. This report demonstrates NJCLD's deep concern and desire that parents, professionals and policy makers work cooperatively in planning and implementing reforms. We strongly urge that strategies be developed within the reform movement to improve education for students with learning disabilities.