

# Schools of Promise: A School District–University Partnership Centered on Inclusive School Reform

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## Abstract

A university–school district partnership, Schools of Promise (SOP), was formed to improve elementary schools for all children through whole-school reform. This effort focused on the concepts of belonging and inclusion, positioning the needs of marginalized students at the center of the reform through a university-facilitated restructuring of service delivery and university-led professional development. This article reports on the findings from a mixed-methods study of this partnership, addressing two research questions focused on the experiences of the participants and major stakeholders involved in this reform effort. The questions include (a) What have been the major accomplishments of SOP? and (b) What barriers have been encountered? The findings suggest there are both significant accomplishments as well as ongoing barriers to these efforts. These themes are discussed, and implications for future research and future directions for this partnership are presented.

## Keywords

inclusion, school reform, service delivery, special education, teacher attitudes, professional development

As David, a 10-year-old fourth grader with a brush cut and glasses, strode into the cafeteria, he was enthusiastically greeted by a group of boys sitting at a table eating their lunches. His face lit up. Although his dentist appointment ran late, he insisted that his mother bring him to school for the afternoon. The boys at the table cleared a spot for David as he sat and joined in the conversation. As they talked and laughed, David blended into the swirl of sights and sounds that are present in an elementary school cafeteria. This might not seem unusual, unless you know David's past schooling experience, which his teachers characterize by chronic absences, withdrawn, antisocial behavior, and little effort to achieve. His placement for learning during the past 4 years has been a self-contained special education classroom. This year, though, it has been different. Because of a schoolwide decision to focus on inclusion of all students in the general education setting, David is fully included alongside his general education peers for the first time. David has made friends, works hard, and comes to school with a smile on his face. Adults throughout the school marvel at the change in his behavior and academic success. "I could never have imagined this happening last year. David is a completely different student now." One teacher commented, "This really demonstrates the power of belonging."

As schools throughout the nation become increasingly inclusive by providing support services for students with

disabilities in the general education setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), it is essential that the structure and philosophy that schools adopt focus on acceptance and belonging. The frequency with which students who have disabilities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers in general education classrooms has grown considerably in recent years, affecting virtually every aspect of contemporary schooling (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007). Studies suggest that the impact of an inclusive model of service delivery affects all students, not just those labeled as having a disability (Burnstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Giangreco, Denis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Morris, Chrispeels, & Burke, 2003). Considering the history of segregation in public schools as a backdrop to the current pressures to target instruction and remediate students when schools are faced with diverse learning needs to raise achievement on state tests (Huefner, 2000; Reese, 2005), some researchers argue that success for all students

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requires a proactive whole-school approach (Frattura & Capper, 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Theoharis, in press). Frattura and Capper (2007) argue that the proliferation of the many distinct programs serving students with diverse needs dilutes school resources as personnel and funds are needed to run and maintain separate school programs. Furthermore, they argue that these separate programs remove some students from the core curriculum. The whole-school Schools of Promise (SOP) approach was designed to harness the integration of school resources (Frattura & Capper, 2007) and the potential power of inclusive practices (Peterson & Hittie, 2003) with aspects of effective whole-school reform (Edmonds, 1979; Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Walmsley & Allington, 1998) and school district–university partnerships (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Holmes Group, 1996; Teitel, 2004; Zeichner, 2005).

This article reports on the findings from a mixed-methods study of this partnership, addressing two research questions focused on the experiences of the participants and major stakeholders involved in this reform effort:

1. In what ways has the SOP partnership accomplished inclusive school reform?
2. What barriers have been encountered throughout this partnership?

This article is organized by first describing the specific reform effort, SOP. Describing SOP is done within the context of the literature on inclusive school reform and university–school partnerships. This is followed by the research methods, the major findings—grouped into two categories identified as accomplishments and barriers—and finally the discussion of the implications. We begin with describing the SOP partnership and reform project.

## SOP

SOP is a partnership between a major research university and a large urban school district. SOP involves a multiyear commitment by university faculty to work closely with three targeted elementary schools that have elected to reexamine their current school practices, restructure their service delivery model, and become more inclusive in all areas of school practice. To begin SOP, two university faculty members met with the superintendent of the urban school district, the assistant superintendent, the director of special education, the head of the teachers union, and the dean of the School of Education to propose the partnership. After deciding on the process, the two faculty members met with all of the elementary school principals in the district to describe the partnership. Seven principals stepped forward as potentially interested in participating.

The university faculty presented information about SOP to the leadership teams and faculty and staff at each of the seven schools. At the conclusion of these discussions, all

staff members (i.e., teachers, administrators, assistants) at each school were asked to fill out a brief survey and indicate if they were interested in participating on the SOP partnership. With this information, the two faculty, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, the director of special education, and the head of the teacher's union selected three schools. The staff at two of the selected schools voted 90% in favor of participating in SOP, and the staff at the third school (Summer Heights) voted at 73%. Although there were other schools not selected that had a higher percentage of staff interested, district administration along with the head of the teacher's union felt Summer Heights was a strong candidate. The head of the union commented, "The fact that 73% of that [Summer Heights] staff is agreeing on this positive direction says something that cannot be ignored. This is not usually the case [at Summer Heights]." Summer Heights also had a history of being one of the first schools in the school district to include some students with disabilities in the 1980s. In sum, this entire process, from gauging school interest to selecting the initial schools, took 4 months.

Although this is an ongoing project, this article focuses on the first school involved in SOP to fully participate in restructuring its staffing and teaching teams to create more inclusive services. This school, Summer Heights, completed the planning stage and the 1st year of implementation. At the time of data collection, the other two schools remained in the planning stages. Table 1 provides demographic information about Summer Heights. There were between 80 and 90 students with disabilities at Summer Heights, and the kinds of services they received prior to SOP and after are described in detail in the first section of the findings. All of the general education classroom teachers and special education teachers at Summer Heights, 32 in total, are certified in the area in which they teach. This means that all of the special education teachers have elementary special education certification and the general education teachers have elementary certification. Of the 32, 2 are probationary teachers, and the rest are tenured within the school district. More than 60% of these teachers have taught for 10 or more years, and given the certification requirements of the state in which they are located, all 32 teachers hold a master's degree in education or a related field (e.g., reading, special education, early childhood).

## SOP Process

After selection of schools, the university faculty facilitated a planning process to design an individualized school plan to enhance a sense of belonging and address issues of inclusion. This process involved creating an SOP team made up of representatives from each team or grade level, general educators, special educators, administrators, teaching assistants, special area teachers (i.e., music, art), and related service providers. This team set goals addressing several areas relating to school

**Table 1.** Summer Heights Demographics: 470 Total Students

Demographic Group	% of Student Body
Student receiving free or reduced-price lunch	69
Student with disabilities	21
White	59
Black or African American	33
Latino	4
Asian	3
Native American	1

reform and belonging: school climate, classroom community, students with disabilities, challenging behaviors, service delivery, staffing patterns, teacher teams, and instructional strategies. The entire staff was surveyed throughout the process to guide the SOP team to identify and prioritize the areas of need and determine the goals.

At Summer Heights, the staff prioritized the areas of inclusive service delivery and staff collaboration for the SOP team to address. Next, an essential component of this partnership and the planning process was having all schools map out their current service delivery and the way they used their human resources in efforts to meet the range of student needs. This involved creating a visual representation of the special education teachers and who worked with which general education teachers and which students, who pulled students from which classrooms, who worked or learned in self-contained spaces, and which paraprofessionals were used where; a complete picture of how and where all staff at the school worked. This was done so all staff could see and understand the bird's-eye view of how human resources were being used. As the team finalized goals and priorities, they created new plans for service delivery utilizing their staff in different ways. At Summer Heights, teams of teachers created drafts of how to rearrange staff, create new teaching teams, and rethink student placement to enhance inclusion and belonging; these drafts were then shared, and the entire SOP team created a final plan.

The SOP plan was seen as a way to raise the quality of the daily instruction for all students and increase a sense of belonging. This was a way to develop a service delivery that would provide seamless services for students with special education needs. However, an important aspect was to increase the capacity of all teachers to meet the needs of a range of students. This fit with the national discussion and spirit of response to intervention (RTI): General education is necessarily connected to special education and responsible for the education of all students. The SOP plan was positioned as a better way to use resources across the school to create inclusive systems and classrooms for all students with particular attention on students with disabilities. Yet this plan was also seen as a way to expand the quality of instruction

for all students through a focus on improving what is known as the first tier of RTI—the differentiated general education classroom and curriculum. This plan also made the second tier seamless as specialists were already working within the classroom and could coplan interventions for general education students as well as students with special education needs. Although the district was currently developing a districtwide plan for second- and third-tier interventions, the SOP plan and partnership focused on increasing the effectiveness of the first tier and allowed the second tier to become seamlessly available for all students.

After the plan was shared and discussed, the Summer Heights staff voted unanimously to move forward with the SOP plan that the team had created. This planning process lasted approximately 5 months, concluding at the end of June with the decision to begin implementation in the upcoming school year.

### *SOP Professional Development*

In addition to restructuring services and teaching teams (discussed in detail in the findings section), the implementation plan included extensive on-site professional development and support for teachers and leaders to build their capacity to meet a wider range of student needs in collaborative ways. Teachers identified and prioritized topics such as instructional strategies for inclusive classrooms, working with students with challenging behavior, professional collaboration, and differentiating instruction. University faculty and doctoral students provided all of the professional development at Summer Heights, which took various forms: large-group and whole-staff meetings, small-group meetings, ongoing courses, targeted instruction for paraprofessionals, and individual team problem solving. Specifically, this meant holding a 3-day summer workshop on collaboration, inclusion, and differentiation prior to the beginning of school for all interested staff; 18 staff members participated. In addition, one faculty member and a doctoral student taught a weekly university graduate course (3 hours a week for 14 weeks) during the fall semester on collaboration and coteaching at Summer Heights, involving 15 university graduate students and 20 staff members from Summer Heights. Also, the university faculty and doctoral students provided in-service training to the entire staff on three staff development days, two additional staff meetings, and one full-day session for paraprofessionals. Furthermore, the initial university faculty brought in additional faculty to support teachers engaging in lesson study and science teaching and learning. The SOP team continued monthly meetings to discuss, problem solve, and learn with the facilitation of the university team. The faculty and two doctoral students met with teams of teachers who indicated they would like ongoing support or specific assistance with a particular issue (four teams for weekly or monthly meetings; three other teams for targeted assistance).

The university team also worked with the school administrators to proactively deal with potential issues and problem solve about the issues that arose. The university faculty met with administrators in an ongoing manner. The administrators often asked for readings following discussion, and the university faculty provided research-based articles and readings. In addition, the administrators and teachers worked with the university faculty to implement the plan using data being collected to measure the attitudes of teachers and administrators and the effect of this partnership.

In keeping with Frattura and Capper's (2007) suggestions, a goal of SOP is to institutionalize a process for creating and revisiting service delivery each year with a raised capacity of staff to sustain this inclusive school reform after the partnership officially ends. In addition to professional development during Year 1, the SOP team began to develop the process that the staff could follow each year to reevaluate service delivery to create teacher teams and student placement for the following year. This raised capacity along with the restructured service delivery will allow these schools to continue successfully after the partnership has formally ended. In addition, the university's preservice teachers (future elementary and special education teachers) have field experiences at Summer Heights as a means to maintain and support teacher capacity and support the growth in future teachers.

### *SOP Definition of Inclusion*

The core principle of SOP is inclusion, which is built on the belief that all students should be valued for their unique abilities and included as an essential part of a school community that is purposefully designed to accept and embrace diversity as a strength, not a weakness. Several definitions of inclusion exist. Kunc (1992) defines inclusion as

the valuing of diversity within the human community. When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become "normal" in order to contribute to the world. . . . We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging. (pp. 38–39)

Udvari-Solner (1997) uses another definition of inclusion:

Inclusive schooling propels a critique of contemporary school culture and thus, encourages practitioners to reinvent what can be and should be to realize more humane, just and democratic learning communities. Inequities in treatment and educational opportunity are brought to the forefront, thereby fostering attention

to human rights, respect for difference and value of diversity. (p. 142)

Both of these definitions frame what inclusion means for SOP. For the SOP project and the resulting study, we defined inclusive education as providing each student the right to an authentic sense of belonging to an inclusive school classroom community where difference is expected, and valued. Rethinking school structures (i.e., student placement, teacher placement, and coteaching) along with bolstering instructional techniques (i.e., community building, differentiation, active learning, modifications, and adaptations) make this possible. Inclusive schools necessitate being thoughtful and positive about students who continue to have difficulty with behavior. This definition of inclusion is intended to allow *all* students (including those students who have been traditionally marginalized) access to challenging and engaging content, opportunities for positive social interaction, and gentle, respectful support.

### *Research on Inclusive School Reform*

Data on inclusive school reform are varied, but the majority of studies conclude that if properly implemented, inclusion can benefit all students, all educators, and entire school communities. The literature suggests that successful inclusive schools provide a unified educational system in which general and special educators work collaboratively to provide comprehensive and integrated services and programming for all students (Frattura & Capper, 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006). As with any innovation or educational reform effort, the successful inclusion of students with disabilities requires fundamental change in the organizational structures of schools and the roles and responsibilities of teachers (Burnstein et al., 2004). A variety of steps must be acknowledged, addressed, and implemented when moving toward inclusive school reform. These include beginning with a discussion of schooling for all students; forming a team, examining the current service delivery model, reviewing and discussing the plan with the school community, incorporating changes into the plan, implementing the plan, and monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting as needed (McLeskey & Waldron, 2006). It is necessary to consider contextual factors when promoting inclusive school reform. Roach and Salisbury (2006) identify key factors that should be addressed in an inclusive school reform initiative. These factors include identifying presumptions of inclusion under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, troubling the identification of general education and special education as separate systems, and discussing best practices of inclusion and systematic reform. Suggested intervention strategies include professional development, having a wide range of stakeholders represented, and holding forums among different levels in the system.

This reform effort and research study borrowed from previous research focused on practice as well as theory. This work is built on the work of Frattura and Capper (2007). Frattura and Capper state,

The population of oppressed and dehumanized students in our schools is growing. If we continue to function in the same manner as we have over the past five decades, we will continue to create schools composed of students who belong and those students who do not. (p. xxvii)

The growing body of literature on inclusive schooling exclusively focuses on students with disabilities and not other students who have been segregated and oppressed. Frattura and Capper also propose,

The recent comprehensive school reform models, by design, come closest to taking such a whole-school approach to raising the academic achievement of all students. . . . However, these comprehensive models traditionally do not specifically address the need of student with disabilities. . . . [They propose] focusing on specific school-level organizational conditions necessary for schools to deliver what we call Integrated Comprehensive Service (ICS) in heterogeneous environments for all learners. (p. 4)

### *Research on University and School Partnerships*

Partnerships between universities and schools, sometimes taking the form of professional development schools (PDSs), are structured to address specific shared needs and goals. Even though the precise nature of PDS relationships vary from setting to setting and evolve over time, the common goal of improving professional practice simultaneously with teacher education is a unifying theme (Metcalf-Turner, 1999; Wesson, Voltz, & Ridley, 1993). Providing schools with access to preservice teachers, offering various professional development opportunities, and making on-site support available to teachers and staff are several common practices associated with universities and schools working collaboratively. Although the SOP partnership is not an official PDS, the aspects of PDSs remain consistent.

Morris et al. (2003) point out that the impact of internal networks on teacher and student learning increased substantially when teacher expertise gained through participation in external networks was brought to bear on grade-level or interdisciplinary team meetings in the school. Teachers engage in job-embedded professional development as they acquire new strategies and pedagogical perspectives through access to site-based courses or outside professional development. They then implement new practices in their classrooms and collaborate with colleagues to enhance their effectiveness. This

is a win-win situation as teachers in the schools learn from the universities and create more effective inclusive classrooms. In turn, those same educators host university preservice teachers in positive inclusive settings that provide mentors and models focusing on success and belonging for all students. Improving teacher preparation and ongoing development of instructional skills are two central components at the foundation of inclusive school reform. Relevant in-service and preservice programs are needed to prepare teachers to work collaboratively with other professionals to be able to meet the academic and social needs of all students. Schools and colleges of education must provide general and special educators with a sound knowledge base and practical application to help shape the emerging inclusive education system (Combs-Richardson & Mead, 2001). Robinson and Carrington (2002) highlight the benefits of the professional development model for inclusive schooling by noting,

This way you are networking with other people, you're learning about people's situations, appreciating other people and where they are at and then designing something that fits here and now. . . . An outcome of professional collaboration is that teachers become supported and empowered—teachers no longer need to just subscribe to the theories of others—they can develop their own theories based on reflections of classroom practice and student learning. (p. 244)

The end product of the shared process is a collaborative relationship that is based on shared beliefs, mutual trust, and reliance. This article examines the perceptions and results created and implemented throughout the 1st year of this university-school partnership: SOP at Summer Heights. The methods and data sources used to inform this article are described next.

This study examines the SOP partnership. Based on the potential promise of university-school district partnerships and inclusive school reform, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways has the SOP partnership accomplished inclusive school reform?
2. What barriers have been encountered throughout this partnership?

### **Method**

To address these questions, a mixed methodology from both the qualitative and the quantitative traditions was used. The collection of data included surveys, interviews with teachers, principals, district administrators, and the university administration, a collection of relevant documents, minutes from meetings, and participant observations from classrooms and

meetings. Graduate students as well as the lead researchers kept field logs from meetings and observations. Although all of these data have informed this research, this article primarily relies on the survey and interview data; thus, those are described in greater detail.

### Surveys

Surveys were used as a means to collect data from school staff members. All teachers, those who were both actively involved in the SOP team process and those not a part of the SOP, were given the opportunity to fill out a survey. Midway through the 1st year of restructuring a survey was given to the entire school staff during a faculty meeting. This survey was adapted from the *Comprehensive School Reform Teacher Questionnaire* (CSRTQ; Ross & Alberg, 1999). The CSRTQ was developed to include generally accepted school reform criteria and to be generalizable across districts (Ross & Lowther, 2003). The survey instrument is included as Appendix A (available online at <http://rse.sagepub.com/supplemental>).

A total of 44 individuals completed the *Schools of Promise Faculty and Staff Survey*: 10 special education teachers, 3 related service providers, 15 general education teachers, 8 teaching assistants, 3 special area teachers, and 2 "other school staff"; 3 individuals did not indicate their position on the survey. In summary, 31 out of a total of 47 certified staff completed the survey, and 8 out of a total of 14 noncertified paraprofessionals did. The survey was not given to secretaries, custodial workers, or food service staff. The administrators chose not to complete the survey. This meant that between certified staff and noncertified paraprofessionals there was a 74% response rate.

The perceptions of the school faculty and staff regarding inclusion and this inclusive school reform effort were obtained through administration of the *Schools of Promise Staff Survey*. This questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of 20 forced-choice items designed to gather information on faculty and staff perceptions and experiences of the SOP reform initiative. These items used a 4-point Likert-type scale and were used to examine perceptions of inclusion, support for the school reform effort, professional development, and overall understanding of the school reform effort. The forced choice items ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Some sample questions from the first part of the survey follow:

- Perceptions of inclusion: Every student, regardless of disability, should be assigned to and be instructed in general education classes
- Support for the school reform effort: Administration has been supportive in implementing this school initiative
- Professional development: Professional development provided by the university team has been valuable
- Understanding of school reform effort: I have a thorough understanding of this school initiative

The second part of the survey consisted of 11 open-ended questions, which were designed to obtain more information on the areas of perceptions of inclusion, support for the school reform effort, professional development, and overall understanding of the school reform effort. Sample questions from this part of the survey include "What are your feelings on every student, regardless of disability being assigned to and instructed in general education classrooms?" and "In three sentences or less, please describe your understanding of Schools of Promise?" This survey has been used to inform this article in addition to the other ongoing interviews and field-based observations.

### Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 10 teachers, 4 paraprofessionals, the principal, the director of special education, and the dean of the university's School of Education. The shortest lasted 30 minutes and the longest took 85 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The teachers and assistants were solicited at the staff meeting after the survey was completed. Three Summer Heights staff volunteered at that time. In addition, the researchers sought to include both teachers and paraprofessionals who had participated in the planning process and those who had not. The teachers included general education, special education, and special areas teachers. This required purposeful sampling and outreach after the initial volunteers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maxwell, 1998) came forward. The interview protocol is included as Appendix B (available online at <http://rse.sagepub.com/supplemental>).

### Analysis

We utilized the constant comparative method of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After each interview, meeting, survey administration, or field observation, the transcripts and notes were coded deductively according to the guiding research questions. Axial and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was subsequently used to further advance the analysis. The research team met before the collection of data and regularly during data collection to ensure trustworthiness and validity of emerging codes and themes. A weekly data analysis meeting was held to share, discuss, and review the collected data. Our analysis produced themes that address the research questions. The findings described in this article combine descriptive statistics from the survey analysis and the qualitative data.



## Results

The analysis of the data suggests evidence of both accomplishments and barriers evident from this partnership. Accomplishments include (a) restructured services that provide membership in general education for all, (b) a perception that inclusive reform benefits all students, (c) increased effectiveness of collaboration among teachers, and (d) improved instructional practices related to the implementation of professional development. The barriers identified included (a) the need for time to collaborate and plan, (b) the impact of negative teacher attitudes on the school climate, and (c) a need for an understanding of a shared philosophy.

### Accomplishments

*Restructured service delivery:* All students are members of general education. This findings section begins with the foundational aspect of the SOP partnership—reexamination of service delivery is key to inclusive school reform. Perhaps the biggest initial accomplishment of SOP is the restructuring and implementation of services for students so that all students, especially all students with disabilities, are members of general education classrooms and receive appropriate services there.

Prior to the SOP partnership, there were three general education classrooms for each grade, kindergarten through sixth. At each grade level, one classroom was labeled as the “inclusive” room. This room had between 18 and 25 students without disabilities and between 6 and 9 students with disabilities. There were three adults working full-time in this room, one general education teacher, one special education teacher, and one paraprofessional.

Prior to SOP restructuring, one and a half “resource” special education teachers provided pullout services for students with mild disabilities across the school. The full-time teachers pulled students from six different classrooms from first through sixth grade and pushed into one third grade classroom. The half-time “resource” teacher pulled students from four different classrooms, first through fourth grade. The resource teachers were working on academic individualized education program goals in these pullout sessions.

Prior to the restructuring, there were two multiage “self-contained” special education classrooms, one for students 6 to 8 years of age, the other for students 8 to 10. Each had 12 students with “significant” disabilities, oftentimes with behavioral issues. One teacher who worked in this type of classroom described, “These students with disabilities spent the entire day together, separate from [general education] peers, and have little connection to the general education curriculum.”

Numerous teachers shared similar feelings to this general education teacher’s comment: “[Under the old model] some classrooms were overloaded with student needs, while other

classrooms had no support for the very real needs of the kids there.” And a number of teachers noticed racial inequities, like this special education teacher did. “The self-contained rooms were largely Black kids, and many of the students being included had as or more significant disabilities but they were White and their parents had demanded they be included.” In sum, the service delivery prior to SOP involved 43 students with disabilities being “overloaded” into rooms called inclusive classrooms and served by 7 special education teachers; 20 to 24 students with disabilities self-contained in entirely special education classrooms, served by 2 special education teachers; and 25 to 30 students pulled out of their classrooms for resource support from 1.5 teachers. This meant Summer Heights had a total of 10.5 special education teachers serving between 85 and 95 students with disabilities, the majority of these students being removed from the general education classroom for significant portions of the day.

This service delivery plan concentrated or overloaded intense needs into certain classrooms, and other classrooms lacked both students with disabilities and support. This model left some students with no or fragmented connection to the general education curriculum, instruction, and social interaction. Students who were pulled out of their classrooms to receive resource teacher support were considered to be in the least restrictive placement, whereas the placement of students who were “overloaded” into “inclusive” classrooms was considered more restrictive, followed by the most restrictive “self-contained” placement.

The implementation of a restructured service delivery was a major change at Summer Heights. This restructuring eliminated “inclusive,” “resource,” and “self-contained” spaces, students, and teachers. All 10.5 special education teachers were paired with 2 general education teachers and a teaching assistant to coplan and codeliver instruction to a range of learners placed heterogeneously in two classrooms. All learners were placed into general education classrooms first, and the team of educators provided a range of services to meet the students’ needs. In rethinking the use of special education resources, creating a service model that placed all students in general education, each special education teacher was responsible for between six and nine students with disabilities with a range of mild to significant disabilities.

A teacher who became a leader in the SOP initiative stated, “If [inclusive school reform] is going to work, it is important for teachers to see all students as their responsibility and work towards making each and every one of them successful.” Another special education teacher commented,

[The SOP restructuring] makes us think of all kids as our kids, we are forced to try to get beyond the idea that some students are inclusive kids, some are resources kids, and some are self-contained kids. This has made us try to see whoever is in our classrooms as “our” kid.

This article reports on the SOP partnership after the 1st year of implementation; monitoring the impact on student achievement has been and remains an essential component. In many school reform efforts, an implementation dip in achievement occurs, as school staffs require new learning to reform, taking a year or two to regain the previous level of achievement. With SOP at Summer Heights, the initial year of implementation has shown primarily stable achievement across the school. Specific cohorts of students have increased their achievement (e.g., the cohort of students moving from Grade 4 to Grade 5 improved from 50% at grade level to 55% at grade level in reading). In the cohort that moved from Grade 3 to Grade 4, where the most students with disabilities came out of self-contained classes into the general classroom, the percentage of students with disabilities achieving proficient in reading dropped (i.e., from 22% to 15%). Staff felt this was perhaps because of the fact that many of these students' needs had not been assessed in formal ways or because they had not had the same access over time to the general education curriculum while in previously self-contained settings. In general, however, students have maintained levels of achievement during the 1st year of implementation, even with the inclusion of more students with significant needs in these percentages (e.g., 55% of the cohort of students who moved from first to second grade achieved "at grade level" on local and standardized reading assessments). During this 1st year, achievement did not increase significantly; however, it also did not decrease while teachers were taking on, in the words of one general education teacher, "very different roles and responsibilities than we had been used to." The relative stability of achievement has continued to keep Summer Heights safe from accountability sanctions.

*A perception of "the art of teaching": Inclusive services that benefit all students.* The second accomplishment was the perception that there were benefits for all students based on the implementation of an inclusive schoolwide model. In fact, 76% of the respondents of the survey indicated that they felt the restructuring of services to become, as many described, "completely inclusive" benefited the students. One teacher pointed out that "inclusion means creating a sense of belonging for all students . . . a new way to look at the art of teaching." This "paradigm shift," as one special education called it, has "prompted teachers, assistants and other staff members to reflect on their current practices and how they have had positive effects on all students not just those receiving special education services." Another general education teacher stated, "By adopting Schools of Promise, we have undertaken a way to include every learner, child and adult, to the height of his/her abilities, and allow everyone to learn and grow together." From the field logs and meeting minutes, it became clear that a critical mass of educators involved in this process saw the need for change in how services were being delivered, not just for some but for all.

In addition, the veteran principal showed her enthusiasm about the SOP partnership, commenting, "This has been so exciting and rejuvenating. I feel energized like I did when I was just starting my career." She maintained, "This is something that the staff wants to do and we will be implementing their plan." She further commented that this enthusiasm and commitment to the plan developed by staff has resulted in "significantly restructuring how services are provided to students."

One of the accomplishments of providing inclusive services for all students has been the increased collective understanding and communication about the use of human resources and the problem solving needed to address issues as they arise. The teachers at Summer Heights have frequently met to make plans for serving students. A key aspect to making SOP sustainable after the partnership ends is the development of a process embedded in a leadership group of teachers to understand and plan the "bird's-eye view" of the school necessary to see the needs of students combined with the human resources holistically when creating service delivery plans for each year. One teacher involved in this SOP group shared, "This has involved seeing beyond one's own classroom or team to seeing the whole picture of the school." In commenting on shifting responsibilities, one teacher noted, "All students should be instructed in general education classrooms. It is the teacher's job to make it work for all students in a classroom . . . to allow them to participate at their level on grade level curriculum." Still another classroom teacher summed up her viewpoint by saying, "Students are a valuable asset to each other and deserve to be educated in a regular education classroom." In addition to the restructured service delivery, the perception that many staff shared about the benefit and value for all students of this work and teachers' roles in creating inclusive reform suggests that Summer Heights has begun to embrace the SOP partnership.

*Together . . . in the eye of the storm: Increased collaboration.* A third accomplishment derived from the findings is that teachers are collaborating and teaming up more than ever before. More than 70% of the staff reported that collaboration was a positive aspect of this school reform effort. One teacher summarized this reality: "The days of one teacher being the lone educator for a group of students are long gone." Because of the increased diversity in today's schools combined with the restructured service delivery, a team approach "to planning and implementing instruction is imperative. . . . With the goal being success for all students, our teachers [at Summer Heights] now rely on each other more than ever" (special education teacher). The implications of effective inclusive teaching collaborations include a mutually beneficial professional environment, increased roles of teachers as advocates for students, and the extent to which inclusion affects an entire school community (Colucci, Epanchin, Hocutt, & LaFramboise, 2004). A related service provider described the process as "successful



(although it may look different) at every level." She continued by saying, "I've always considered this an amazing, child-centered staff. Even in the eye of the storm that we call change, we [the staff] continue to focus collaboratively on what's best for children." Although this new sense of collegiality and cooperation is not always easy, the majority of respondents said that effective collaboration is essential. Some comments included,

I see it [inclusion and SOP] as a belief or philosophy, along with strategies, to have all children feel they belong to their peer group and to help them meet their academic potential within their group. The strategies provide for collaboration and communication skills educators need to make this happen—as well as instructional strategies to meet diverse needs.

The director of special education described his perspective on collaboration between the schools and the central office administration:

As a result of the Schools of Promise partnership, I think the staff [at Summer Heights] sees the central office not as an obstacle but as a support mechanism. . . . [In the past] most teachers would say central office is in their pristine palace down here . . . now they are starting to see us in a different light. And that is a big deal for a place like [Summer Heights].

Although changing the image of the central office was not a goal of this initiative, it is a potential by-product of increased collaboration among schools, the university, and the central office. We believe this happened as a result of a long-term and systematic partnership between a university and a school district.

In describing the positive aspects of this school reform effort, others mentioned that "there has been more communication among staff members and students (especially those previously in self-contained settings). [Previously excluded students] are feeling positive, included, and making new friends." In addition, "there is more interteam collaboration," which has increased "staff involvement and commitment."

*Learning together: Improved instruction through professional development.* Fourth, the data suggest that the support from the university faculty and administration as well as the professional development that has been provided as a component of the SOP have had a positive effect on teachers. In five of the teacher interviews and in 85% of the teacher surveys, the Summer Heights teachers suggested that their confidence levels are rising because of the new strategies being used to instruct all students. Voltz (2001) points out that for "inclusion to be purposeful, professional development must be present and geared towards the needs of the

university student teachers, classroom and special education teachers" (p. 289).

Systems of support emerged as an important aspect of this school reform effort. A majority of the staff responded that they felt supported by the university and the school administration. More than 90% of the staff responded on their surveys that they felt that the support from the university was both important and valuable. Of the staff, 82% felt the school administration was providing important support for SOP. Support has come in a variety of forms, including professional development classes and workshops, whole-staff and SOP team meetings, individual grade level team meetings, and in-class observations. The effect of the support is reflected in comments made by teachers and staff. One teacher observed,

Support from administration in helping the process move forward has been important as well as . . . allowing teachers to design this "program" and offer support. Excellent summer in-service and extremely valuable in-service this fall has been positive. The next step will be in taking the concepts from the fall in-service and continuing to discuss those ideas as a staff. Also, using our staff development half-days, after school, and conference days as well as wind chill days when "all" are present has been crucial.

The director of special education echoed this support. "Ms. Wilson [principal at Summer Heights] has embraced this because she wants to make Summer Heights simply the best." In reflecting on the kinds of support provided by the university, a second teacher remarked,

The in-services and workshops have been outstanding. The individual support for teams has also been fantastic though some teams feel more supported than others. The challenge for next year includes ways to engage teams that have felt not as involved or supported. Perhaps a way to continue some level of in-service should also be looked at.

Still a third teacher stated,

A majority of teachers want to see it work and are at least trying to collaborate and communicate. In-service has been fantastic, though not everyone has been exposed to or participated on the same level. Administration is clearly behind the initiative.

Although the SOP initiative is still in the 1st year of implementation, it is promising to see that participants in the process already identify benefits. The recognition of the benefits of inclusion to all students, the improvement in staff collaboration, and the acknowledgment of the support provided by

professional development are a good start and should serve as a catalyst for future growth as the process continues to evolve. As with any systems change, along with accomplishments come barriers. Recognizing and responding to the areas within the SOP school reform effort that have been identified as negative or troublesome are vital.

### Barriers

Although there have been various accomplishments identified as a result of the SOP partnership, our findings suggest that many significant barriers exist. This is not uncommon when in the initial stages of any institutional change. In other studies, researchers have gathered feedback from teachers, parents, and students in identifying the most common barriers to inclusion and possible suggestions for removing the barriers (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Barriers identified in this school reform effort are based on the potentially overwhelming nature of school reform and include (a) the lack of time provided to collaborate, (b) the influence of negative teacher attitudes on the school climate, and (c) a lack of understanding and reflection in regard to not having a shared philosophy of inclusion throughout the school. We provide a number of examples from the data to illustrate these themes.

*Time is not on our side: Lack of time to collaborate.* One teacher discussed a key difficulty when thinking about the SOP process: "Teachers seem to be pulled for a number of meetings—sometimes there doesn't seem to be enough time for things to be organized—seems as though people are rushing to get things done on a tight schedule." Similarly, in another study, Hobbs, Bullough, Kauchak, Crow, and Stokes (1998) point out "the most significant roadblock to change was the teachers' need for time to talk [with other teachers], time to discuss what was happening in their classrooms, and schools with other teachers, time to work on committees and promote professional development" (p. 50). On one hand teachers and staff indicate the importance and value of collaboration, saying that the amount they are working together is a positive accomplishment. On the other hand, however, many of those same teachers bemoan the lack of time that they are afforded to carry out the necessary level of communication and planning needed to be effective. In fact, 40% of the surveys indicated that staff felt they did not have the time they needed to collaborate and work with their teammates. Comments from the staff on this logistical quandary include the following:

The time needed to plan and learn to collaborate is essential. Equally important is time to simply discuss and share. This year, there has not always been time to get it all in—though the effort to do so has been fantastic. To keep this going beyond the involvement of [this university] is a real challenge. As administration

and staff changes are made at Summer Heights, carrying this forward will be a challenge.

Another teacher illustrated the need for time to collaborate with her extended team.

We need to value all adults and see their "worth." In my classroom, teaching assistants are a very integral part of our routine. We need time to communicate and try to have stable teams. There is not enough time to communicate. I'm frustrated with my lack of communication regarding the necessary modifications.

As mentioned in the previous comment, the lack time to meet affects not only the teacher-to-teacher teaming but also the effectiveness of other professionals in the classroom. A teaching assistant pointed out the need for

more time for assistants to meet with teachers—we have very little time to meet together. We have lessons to carry out with students that we may not be familiar with. It is very difficult to sit down with a group of students and read the plans for the first time and carry out the lesson.

Of the paraprofessionals, 70% indicated on their surveys that they did not have any meaningful time to collaborate or receive training from the teachers with whom they worked. A general education teacher summed up the thoughts of many by reflecting, "We need time—time to plan, teach, . . . talk." It is clear that having time is an important and legitimate issue on the minds of the teachers and staff and must be addressed if the inclusive school reform efforts are to move forward and be successful.

*Working with resistance: Negative teacher attitudes influencing school climate.* A second issue that was identified by respondents as being an area of concern was that of the negative attitudes of a few staff members and how that negative energy had an impact on the overall school climate and progress of the inclusive school reform. The survey results highlight an aspect of this phenomenon in that 40 out of 44 staff members, approximately 91%, surveyed expressed that they supported this effort at their school, although 4 individuals out of the 44 surveyed indicated they were not supportive of the school reform initiative. Of those 4 individuals, 3 had not been active in the SOP process and meetings. Clearly, the vast majority of staff at Summer Heights were in support of SOP partnership and inclusive reform. Yet in analyzing the staff's responses on the survey to the negative aspects or challenges to this work, 20% of those who were supportive of SOP felt that the attitudes of a few colleagues were the "largest struggle" or "greatest challenge" to this work. In coding and analyzing the open-ended responses to the survey, the notion of the

"squeaky negative wheel" was the concept discussed the most. Responses from the staff were straight to the point in identifying the negative energy spread by those opposed to aspects of inclusive school reform as being a barrier. One teacher lamented, "There are staff that say they support the initiative but act differently and have negative attitudes. People who say negative things—don't work on problem solving to make things better." Another teacher who shared difficulties with SOP pointed out, "The negative people that are not interested in change and those that always cut people down somehow should be addressed. The problems faced so far have been adult problems, not student problems." The feelings of many staff members are summed up in a statement offered by a teacher: "If a person does not like this model and has a negative attitude—it makes for a long day!" Although it is important to acknowledge and respect the fact that not all people share the same beliefs and opinions, it is even more important to not allow negative views to overshadow the positive, constructive actions that occur on a daily basis throughout the school. If the squeaky wheel is constantly getting the grease, it takes away from the overall operation of the vehicle that drives inclusive school reform.

Same book, different page: Lack of shared understanding and reflection on inclusion. Last, the lack of a shared philosophy in regard to what inclusion actually means when implemented throughout the school was problematic to many staff members. Although most people were able to define SOP as an effort to educate all students in the general education classroom, a shared understanding of inclusion for all students was not as consistently reported. The viewpoint of inclusion being appropriate for "some, not all" was communicated by a number of staff members. However, many of those same people were able to identify the goal of SOP as including all. Staff comments included the following:

I believe to a certain extent that all students should be in a regular classroom. I do believe that there are some students, who, for various reasons may need to have a "fallback room." When students are so disruptive that they are negatively impacting the rest of the class and the teacher is spending a majority of time with a single student, the placement needs to be looked at.

A teaching assistant commented, "In most cases, it is an excellent idea. With the exception of those children with extreme disabilities that should be in a life skills based program, it is a great idea." A special education teacher added, "There are or will be a student or two that needs more support academically or behaviorally than the SOP model can give. But for the most part all kids being included will be best for all."

Like the staffs of many schools, the Summer Heights staff has divergent views about what inclusion should and does mean. This lack of a shared philosophy of inclusion is pointed

to as a barrier to the progress of inclusive school reform. One teacher stated, "I think we as adults need to all be . . . on the same page. I also think we need to meet the needs of each student; not just have them fall under our model." Another teacher remarked,

All staff members need to be willing and open to SOP. People being willing to "think out of the box" in order to ensure the success of all students and are willing to do things differently will be most successful.

This suggests a tension between philosophy and practice in that although many teachers and staff members are able to articulate the definition of inclusion through an SOP lens, some staff do not understand and/or believe that "all means all" and that inclusion as previously defined is a way to provide belonging and support for all students regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Inclusion, as defined for SOP, is not a static target but is part of an ongoing process that responds to the needs of students and the realities of the school staff.

## Discussion and Implications

There is much to be learned from university and school district partnerships intent on having a significant impact on schools and children. At this northeastern university there have been a multitude of programs between the university and the school district, and according to the dean of the School of Education "Schools of Promise is one of the most significant in terms of a long-term and substantial commitment to improving the education of all students and specifically students with disabilities." This article documents the initial accomplishments of and barriers facing the SOP partnership after the planning stage and 1 year of implementation at Summer Heights Elementary School.

This project fits with Robinson and Carrington's (2002) as well as Combs-Richardson and Mead's (2001) work on school district partnerships around issues of inclusive systems in the ongoing support from the university to provide professional development in terms of classroom teaching, collaboration, and a process to redesigning service delivery. In addition, the 1st year of implementation has moved Summer Heights to attempt what Frattura and Capper (2007) describe as an essential foundation of equitable education—providing all students, regardless of ability or disability, their education in heterogeneous classrooms with integrated services brought and delivered within that context. The implications of this study directly affect several specific categories of people.

### Implications for Administrators

School administrators who are involved or wish to be involved in inclusive school reform need to take the lead in creating,

communicating, and upholding an inclusive vision with their school staff. In a collaborative manner, school leaders need to examine and reconfigure service delivery to maximize inclusion and belonging through a reconfigured use of staff. Policies and placement procedures need to be reexamined to keep students with disabilities in the same schools and classrooms as their general education counterparts. In other words, it is important to check to ensure that all students are attending the schools and classrooms they would be attending if they did not have a disability to avoid separate spaces for students with disabilities. In the SOP partnership, these aspects have been cofacilitated by university faculty, the school administration, and teacher leaders; however, inclusive school reform can be achieved when the school administrators serve these roles without other partners (Theoharis, 2007).

Another lesson for administrators that became apparent is the need for consistent and continual praise and reinforcement of productive inclusive practices. Knowing that the teachers' efforts are noticed and appreciated motivates teachers and staff. School administrators can make this happen. Teachers have stated that the key thing they need is time to meet and plan. In creating the schedules that guide the school day, school administrators who ensure that inclusive teams have consistent, shared planning time that allows for as much input from all team members as possible are setting their reform efforts up for better success.

Although it is important to acknowledge the feelings and opinions of all staff members, school leaders should resist catering to those whose negative energy is focused on derailing the plan. Opportunities for all staff should continually be provided for involvement and acceptance of inclusive school reform. As with any school change, inclusive school reform has the potential to challenge the practices, values, and comfort zones to which teachers and staff have become accustomed. Knowing this, administrators must strive to communicate the importance of a united effort and staunchly uphold the standards of professional behavior. School staff members look to their leaders for guidance, direction, and action. The clear and consistent communication of philosophy, expectation, and support can provide a solid foundation for change. Although this article draws most specifically on the research on inclusive school reform and school-university partnership, it is clear that many of the implications for leadership resonate with the work on effective schools and effective leadership. However, we see the leadership necessary for this as distinct from and even as an extension beyond effective schools and leadership (Theoharis, 2007). Theoharis (2007) argues that the leadership necessary to tackle inclusive school reform sees beyond the variety of programs that support diverse learners and beyond an understanding that students have individual needs by "ending separate/pullout programs . . . strengthening the core teaching and curriculum and insures that diverse students have access to that core . . . [and] knowing that building community, collaboration, and differentiation are tools to

ensure that all students achieve success together" (p. 252). The administrator's vision and ability to deal with problems and issues rely not only on leadership skills or components of effective schools but also, in part, on an understanding of and commitment to the principles of inclusive schools.

### *Implications for University Faculty*

The implications from the SOP partnership in regard to university faculty include a focus on future professional development opportunities offered to teachers and administrators as well as the educational approach provided for undergraduates majoring in education. Much of what was considered noteworthy from the teacher feedback focused on the importance of ongoing support and acquisition of new strategies and perspectives relating to inclusive education. Having this knowledge as a framework, university faculty can plan and implement specific professional development opportunities as well as course work to meet the needs of both preservice and practicing classroom teachers and further strengthen inclusive pedagogy in the schools. This clearly resonates with the literature on PDSs and university-school partnerships (Combs-Richardson & Mead, 2001; Metcalf-Turner, 1999; Morris et al., 2003; Robinson & Carrington, 2002; Wesson et al., 1993).

In addition, a lesson from the SOP partnership was the added focus on systemic partnerships and a systemic approach to service delivery. Important findings from the partnership suggest that one aspect assisting in the initial progress was the foundational support from the school district central administration and the dean's office at the university. Furthermore, engaging the Summer Heights staff in examining the use of human resources, teacher teams, and student placement is a key role that the university faculty facilitated in this partnership and an important lesson for the university's role in collaboration and an argument for having faculty with a range of expertise meaningfully engaged in ongoing ways.

In addition, university faculty can use their resources to highlight and support schools that are making strides toward inclusive school reform. Many of the stakeholders described a renewed or an increased energy in their school. Some people attributed that to the districtwide attention their school has been getting because of this effort; others highlighted the support and attention coming from the university faculty and staff. The sense of accomplishment and pride that a school community feels when being recognized in larger academic circles and the motivation and inspiration that it can produce should not be underestimated.

### *Implications for Teachers*

Inclusive school reform relies on the actions and beliefs of teachers and school staff. Implications from the SOP for teachers focus on how they work together collaboratively. Purposeful efforts to create teams that work together to plan, communicate,

and teach all students is a crucial first step (Friend & Bursuck, 2004). The teachers at Summer Heights needed to be flexible and open to new ideas and strategies and to be willing to request and then access professional development opportunities and resources when support was needed. Learning to work collaboratively in an inclusive environment is new to many educators, so patience and persistence are essential. Because teachers entered into this partnership at different levels, it was important to be empathetic and supportive at the same time. This is another key lesson for teachers.

The Summer Heights teachers needed to be willing to adapt to the roles and responsibilities they assumed as part of a team. Open and honest communication and reflection were essential for teachers involved in inclusive school reform. Another lesson for teachers is to expect differences of opinion and style; the key is to not allow disputes to muddle the overall effectiveness of the group. This requires teachers to be advocates for students but also to be advocates with their colleagues for the professional values and practices that allow inclusive education to be successful.

### Future Research

Given the findings of this study, there are a variety of areas to be considered for future research. First, this work focused on the planning and 1st year of implementation of the first SOP; replications at this school and in schools doing similar work is necessary. Second, as this reform work is ongoing, the continued collection of participants' perspectives and experiences is essential. We understand that the skills and attitudes of the teachers and staff involved in inclusive school reform are continuously developing and shifting throughout the process. Third, although the early academic results described in this article are promising, the academic and social progress of all students involved in the fully inclusive school community must be a central aspect of the future research on this partnership. Last, we will continue to study the perceptions of teachers, administrators, students, and parents in these schools. These ideas will be used not only for research but also for revisions and modifications to the inclusive school reform partnership.

### A Final Word

From this research and from working in this SOP partnership, it is clear that this work is difficult, but promising. The findings from this study indicate that much has been accomplished and that there continues to be serious work to do. Careful attention to the needs and suggestions of the major stakeholders in this study is essential to maintaining this partnership. As is the case with any significant change, some school staff members opposed the implementation; however, the majority of teachers and administrators, even those who disagreed with aspects of the plan, work tirelessly to make substantial improvements for students. Although the SOP initiative described here is not

perfect, leveraging the power of university-school partnerships to focus on creating inclusive schools where all students belong has provided an avenue to create the conditions to meet the diverse needs of students through inclusive service delivery.

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