Educators have been challenged to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Although this mandate has existed for 30 years, local educators report difficulties with program planning; graduation and grading of students with disabilities; recruitment and retention of qualified teachers; ensuring access of all students to the general education curriculum; training in collaborative planning and teaching; and placing students in the least restrictive setting. These challenges inhibit educators’ ability to include students with disabilities in general education and are largely the by-product of district and state policy. This article describes a bottom-up, context-specific change model that focused on providing professional development at each level (local to state) of the system and fostering communication across the levels. This strategy produced lasting change in 2 states in policy and local implementation of policy and serves as a model for teachers and principals seeking to promote inclusion.

In the 30 years since the original passage of the federal special education law (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), teachers and building-level administrators have increasingly supported the needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Over the past 10 to 15 years, progressively more general and special educators have collaborated to assist students with disabilities in the general education classroom as part of inclusion (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1992) and changes to federal law (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA] of 2004). Yet, even as teachers and principals employ new instructional and staffing strategies in schools, they have reported district- and state-level challenges with respect to inclusion and program planning; graduation and grading of students with disabilities; recruitment and retention of qualified teachers; ensuring access of all students to the general education curriculum; training in collabo-
rative planning and teaching; and placing students in the least restrictive setting. These challenges inhibit teachers’ and principals’ ability to include students with disabilities in the general education program (Bowen & Klass, 1993; Buswell, Schaffner, & Seyler, 1999; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Villa & Thousand, 2000).

The challenges cited are often beyond the control of a single teacher or principal. The issues are dictated by state and local policy, and significantly impact how schools operate and how children perform. Throughout the 1990s, educators increasingly identified policy areas that needed to be addressed to align the intent of the IDEIA with actual school-level practice (McDonnell & McLaughlin, 1997; McLaughlin, Henderson, & Rhim, 1998; Salisbury, Strieker, Roach, & McGregor, 2001). Understanding the relationship between policy and practice can help local educators negotiate the system to support students with disabilities and their families. Employing change strategies that loop between policy and practice can create continuous feedback to policymakers and educators to ensure that goals, policy, and practice are mutually supporting.

In 1995, the Consortium for Inclusive Schooling Practices (CISP) was created with federal funding to help fill the gap between the intent of federal law and the implementation of policy and practices at the state and local level. Over a 7-year period, CISP employed a three-pronged strategy in four states that focused on: (a) providing professional development and assistance concurrently at several levels of the service delivery system; (b) incorporating a unique set of stakeholders in the process of developing greater expertise and knowledge among the people in the system; and (c) integrating the levels of the system, such as classroom, building, district, and state, through feedback forums to promote communication and problem solving within and across levels in the system. This article describes the change model employed by CISP, how the model was successfully implemented in two states, and recommendations for those who wish to try this change strategy.

CISP adopted a bottom-up, context-specific, change strategy for their work (Chin & Benne, 1985). Rather than assuming that a traditional top-down transfer of knowledge will change behavior, the bottom-up approach assumes that change occurs as participants change their orientation to old behaviors and develop commitments to new ones. Chin and Benne argued that “change in attitudes, values, skills, and significant relationships, not just changes in knowledge, information, or intellectual rationales for action and practice” (p. 23) are necessary for promoting changes in patterns of practice. We used this theory because it has been linked to sustained change among adults (Dirkx, Blodgett, & Turner, n.d.; Kronley & Handley, 2001; Marks & Wright, 2002; Sargent, 2000). The bottom-up change model takes into consideration the specific context in which the change must occur and presumes that changes in attitudes, values, and skills precede changes in practice (Chin & Benne, 1985). Furthermore, because the top-down change strategy had been applied through federal law since 1976 with limited success, we reasoned that a bottom-up approach encompassing significant stakeholders and powerbrokers at the building, district, and state level, would be more effective (Bodilly, 1998; Deal, 1990; Gersten & Brengelman, 1996).

Elements of the Change Model

We constructed a change model based on a bottom-up theory that was grounded in state–local contexts and specific interventions based on building-level knowledge, skills, and problem-focused communication, as well as linked to changes at the policy and practice level (see Figure 1).

Contextual Factors

When we began development of our model for change, we needed to account for a variety of contextual forces. First, both amendments to IDEIA and case law clarified the presumption that students with disabilities would be included in the general education program and receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment in their neighborhood schools (Sands, Kozelski, & French, 2000; Skrtic, 1991).
Second, despite this presumption in federal law, special and general education systems across the United States were largely separate and distinct (Moscovitch, 1993; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1992). Third, there was an established and growing body of effective approaches for supporting students with disabilities, in general education programs and classrooms (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998; Villa & Thousand, 1995; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1988). Finally, school reform was increasingly approached from a systemic perspective, instead of approaching one student, or one problem, at a time (Fuhrman, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Smith & O’Day, 1991). The systemic approach acknowledges “the interdependence among the various systems and parts of systems that provide services and support to children and youth” (Salisbury et al., 2001, p. 3). We designed our change approach in ways that would assist states and local districts in uniting their separate special and general education systems to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education program.

**Interventions**

Our change model involved three interventions: (a) providing professional development at the building, district, and state levels through training and technical assistance; (b) incorporating a unique set of stakeholders in the professional development process; and (c) promoting communication and problem solving through feedback forums within and across levels of the system to resolve differences in what policies intended and their implementation in practice.

**Professional development.** We employed knowledge and skill-building activities at the building, district, and state level as one element of intervention. At the building level, project staff evaluated the inclusiveness of each school’s practices using observations and a school climate survey. Guided by those assessments, CISP staff developed an action plan with each school based on the priorities identified by school personnel. CISP staff provided technical assistance to teachers and building principals to help them identify beliefs, attitudes, expectations, structures, and practices that functioned as barriers to the inclusion of all students in general education classrooms. CISP then helped the educators in the building learn strategies for addressing those barriers (e.g., changing team teaching practices, modifying school schedules, differentiating instruction, and developing individual educational plans that were grounded in the general education curriculum). At the high school level, special education faculty were reassigned to discipline-specific departments such as English and science, rather than isolated in their own special education department. In addition, technical assistance was provided using a feeder path approach. That is, CISP directed its training–technical assistance ef-
forts toward teachers and principals across elementary schools that fed into middle schools, which in turn fed into the high school. This strategy allowed the district to transition students from one inclusive school to another and in the process, enhanced the system-wide effects of the work.

At the district level, project staff focused on issues generated at the school level, as well as on concerns generated by district-level personnel. Project staff provided information related to aligning the academic program with special educational supports such as adaptive technology, physical therapy, and school-wide behavior management programs. Project staff helped school personnel discuss integration among the different levels of schools: elementary, middle, and high school. Based on the identified needs of the district and school, discussions were facilitated about program and policy. For example, district personnel engaged in discussions about models for deploying specialized support personnel (e.g., occupational and speech therapists) regionally and in a consultative fashion, rather than always as direct service providers. Principals were provided information on the success of inclusive schooling models as measured by student achievement and cost data. Project staff presented information and updates on our work to local school board members, who are often left out of the loop in such program delivery discussions until a problem surfaces in the community. Special education directors at the local level were provided information that clarified state regulations and staffing requirements, as well as service delivery options, that the special education directors thought were prohibited by state or federal law.

In each state, a policy study was conducted to determine the level of integration between the special and general education systems. Assistance at the state level included providing analysis of the state’s special education funding formula and securing technical assistance from other national experts for the state agency personnel to develop legislative proposals for change. State technical assistance also included identifying areas of state regulation that needed to be changed based on working with the local districts and schools. CISP staff served as a convener at the state level to bring legislative, budget, and education agency staff together to discuss issues associated with inclusion and potential regulatory, budgeting, and policy changes.

**Unique set of stakeholders.** Throughout this process, one of the core principles of our approach was to “be intentional about broadening representation at the table” (Salisbury et al., 2001, p. 7). One of the key targets of this work was to break down the barriers between general and special education to promote inclusive policies, structures, and practices. CISP was consistent in defining inclusion as “a philosophy that undergirds the entire educational system” (p. 3, italics added). Using the core principles of inclusion and representation, stakeholders were recruited based on their positions within the general education system. We did not want to be labeled as just another special education project. To counteract the phenomenon of rounding up the usual players, CISP staff recruited department of education and legislative staff from outside special education as the primary target audience.

Another unique feature of this change strategy was the direct involvement of the state board of education in the change process. State boards of education are the policymaking body at the state level that governs pre-K–12 education in most states. State boards set the vision for education in the state, establish budget priorities, enact rules and regulations, and conduct program evaluations. In many states, decisions of the state board of education carry the force of law. Despite the potential influence of this governing body, they are often overlooked in education change models.

At the district level, mirroring the state-level activity, project staff explicitly sought the participation and direction from the local board of education, another often overlooked governing body whose impact can be significant. Although local boards of education are not particularly known to lead inclusive initiatives, they are known for squelching such initiatives when they have not been fully included in the process from the beginning (Roach, Ashcroft, & Stamp, 1995). CISP sought input from the local board members in each
district at the inception of the change process and
at regular intervals thereafter.

At the district and building levels, as with the
state level, the primary focus was on recruiting
general educators and building administrators to
the effort. Participants also included special edu-
cation personnel. In some instances, this project
was the first time the special and general educa-
tion personnel had worked together. The stake-
holders recruited for this work were integral to the
communication and feedback process used to sup-
port systemic change.

**Forums among different levels of the system
and problem-based communication.** Consistent
with a bottom-up, context-specific theory of
change, CISP created a number of forums for
stakeholders at all levels of the system to provide
feedback to participants at other levels of the sys-
tem. These forums created a dynamic change pro-
cess that illuminated barriers within the system
and provided an opportunity to directly address
misconceptions among stakeholders at each level.
Indeed, the promise of direct communication with
other levels of the system through these feedback
forums was an incentive to many participants to
engage, and remain, in the process. The forums
were designed as structured, interactive meetings
of stakeholders within and across systems and
were used to identify issues, barriers, and potential
solutions. The feedback loop process was charac-
terized by the following elements:

- **Context-specific outcome orientation.** Each
feedback activity was focused on achieving a
state or district priority.

- **Continuous feedback loop.** Policy approaches
were proposed to families, teachers, and prin-
cipals, and their feedback contributed to further
deliberations among policymakers, educators,
and families.

- **Participatory.** In each state and district in which
CISP worked, all stakeholders were actively in-
volved in developing the objectives, design, and
implementation of the project and technical
assistance.

- **Explicit, rather than informal.** Many states and
districts employ an informal feedback loop to
get input on policy needs and recommended
changes from teachers and principals. In other
instances, policymakers rely on the grapevine
and anecdotes to learn about local-level policy
implementation issues. In contrast, the purpose
of the CISP forums was explicitly to provide
feedback within and across levels of the system.

The forums provided opportunities for commu-
nication and feedback among stakeholders who of-
ten did not know each other prior to this project.

**Outcomes**

CISP worked in three districts within each of
four states and amassed considerable information
about the promotion of inclusive policies and
practices at the state, district, and school levels.
Following are two examples of how the change
process was applied. In State A, new policy re-
sulted from our work. In State B, policy was clari-
fied and the implementation of inclusive practices
was expanded at the local level.

**State A**

In 1995, the State Board of Education identi-

cified funding as a key policy area affecting the de-


delivery of inclusive services and supports. Special
education funding in State A was widely recog-
nized as problematic when CISP started work in
the state. In 1994, prior to CISP’s involvement in
the state, the legislature asked the Legislative Ana-
lyst’s Office, the Department of Education, and
the Department of Finance to design a new fund-
ing formula for special education. A proposal was
introduced by a state senator in the legislature in
1995 but was defeated, chiefly because larger
school districts in the state were benefiting from
the existing inequitable distribution of special ed-
ucation funds.

CISP worked with legislative staff to reignite
their willingness to try to address the funding issue.
Simultaneously, CISP staff began to work with a
coalition of the largest school districts in the state
(those who had blocked the earlier legislation) to determine what provisions would need to be present in a new formula for the large districts to sign on. As a result of this activity and informal prodding from legislative staff, a permanent, state-level, independent policy commission took up the issue of special education funding reform. CISP provided consultation, as well as written input, and facilitated the involvement of nationally known special education finance researchers in the work of the commission. CISP staff worked with the lobbyists from the large districts and a member of the state legislature who agreed to sponsor legislation. In addition, CISP staff facilitated informational sessions for district administrators across the state to gather support for the proposed change in the funding model. The outcome of these efforts and others produced a new special education funding bill. This bill was passed in the legislature and signed into law in 1997.

State B

At the beginning of the project, CISP staff conducted a study of education policies in State B and met with the State Board of Education to determine the members’ thoughts regarding inclusion. CISP recommended that the Board increase its communication with stakeholders because the Board perceived that there was no outcry for inclusive education in the state, despite the fact that a major class-action lawsuit had recently been settled on that very point. The Board determined that CISP could provide support by conducting forums to determine sentiment toward inclusion and what stakeholders felt was needed to further support inclusion in the state.

CISP and the State Department of Education jointly sponsored focus groups at six regional forums throughout the state. A variety of stakeholders were represented at each forum, including families, teachers, building principals, district special education directors and superintendents, teacher educators, local school board members, and members of the State Board of Education. The primary objective was to obtain public perceptions about inclusive schooling practices for students with and without disabilities, as well as to obtain stakeholder input on how to increase and improve inclusive education in the state. Of the many issues explored, two major recommendations emerged: (a) adopt a state philosophy or vision statement on inclusive education; and (b) review state policies and regulations in personnel training and funding.

In response to the previous recommendations, the State Department of Education developed a booklet about inclusive education practices. The purpose of the booklet was to clarify the state’s policy regarding special education in the least restrictive environment and to answer commonly asked questions about inclusive schooling practices. The booklet was distributed widely throughout the state and was one of the first visible efforts on the part of the State Department of Education to make clear its support for inclusive practices.

In both examples, the work of CISP was outcome oriented, iterative, context specific, participatory, and explicit. The change process was dynamic and allowed for adjustment and change in either the policy (in the case of State A) or the implementation of the policy (in the case of State B).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The CISP approach to change was effective in addressing policy as well as implementation issues. The process helped state and local districts identify barriers to supporting inclusion and to identify why the barriers existed. The feedback process provided constituents and policymakers with opportunities to be heard and a venue for workable solutions to be developed through professional development efforts at all levels of the system.

Communication was a key aspect of the change strategy. Planned communication took place over an extended period within and across levels of the system. CISP issued specific invitations to stakeholders to participate in the feedback events rather than extending broad open invitations to groups, which we think helped promote participation. Frequent and recurring discussion tended to breed trust among the various stakeholders and lead to compromises and shared vision that supported the policy development and implementation process within and across levels of the system. Communi-
cation was fostered in a mixture of large and small venues. This allowed participants opportunities to disclose in settings where they felt their voices would be heard, or alternatively, in larger settings where anonymity was preferred. Ensuring that those who were providing feedback were free from retribution was critical to receiving honest feedback about existing policies and practices.

The statewide changes that took place have persisted since CISP completed its work in these states. CISP was not the sole cause of the changes described. Rather, CISP contributed to policy and practice shifts. CISP contributed to changes in the policy and practices through a bottom-up, context-specific process that enhanced knowledge and skills and addressed the expectations, beliefs, and relationships that affected the implementation of public policy at the state, district, and school levels. CISP contributed to the resolution of barriers to systemic change by facilitating problem-based communication within and across levels of the state education system.

Other reformers attempting this type of work may wish to carefully consider how to assemble a set of players who are in a position to actually make the types of decisions about which they are seeking resolution. Bringing diverse perspectives to the table enriches the conversations and strengthens the solutions that result from these deliberations. Technical assistance providers should be willing to broker support and assistance for schools and local districts as needed, rather than assuming all of the expertise will reside in their project team. Embedded professional development, delivered over an extended period of time, is critical in helping large systems change in substantive ways. “Drive-by/drop-in” episodic technical assistance is less expensive and less time intensive; however, it does not allow for differences in the culture/context, or for understanding the underlying causes of issues in the states and districts. Embedded, context-specific approaches at all levels of the system are needed to move conversations to a deeper level, and in the process, serve as a foundation for the relationships that are needed to reeducate personnel and change systems. Although we had some general parameters for our approach, it is important to point out that above all, we remained flexible and responsive to the changing needs and priorities of the districts and states with whom we worked. CISP worked in these states for a total of 4 years. Building trust takes time, but we found it was time well spent in our efforts to promote inclusive policies and practices on a large scale.

Finally, it is important to note that despite the inception of our work a decade ago, the issues that prompted the need for our capacity-building project remain as obstacles to the implementation of federally mandated general and special education policies (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004) today. When teachers, principals, and other educators understand the connection between their work and the federal, state, and local policies that guide their work, they are better able to provide feedback to policymakers to get policies changed. Indeed, policymakers are often looking for the type of feedback teachers and principals provided through this project. We hope that the information in this article will be useful to others serving as agents of change and that more teachers and principals will see themselves as potential change agents in the future.

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