In spite of the emphasis in public policy and the professional literature on developing inclusive programs for students with disabilities over the past 30 years, surprisingly little progress has been made in this regard in school districts across the United States. One approach to change that is currently being used with some success in general education and that has shown promise for developing more inclusive schools is comprehensive school reform (CSR). This article provides a brief description of an approach to CSR that has been used to develop programs that support a diverse range of students, including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Preliminary research on this approach to school change suggests that CSR has the potential to provide teachers and administrators with a framework to develop successful, sustainable inclusive programs.

However, further research is needed to document the effectiveness of CSR across settings and with a range of outcome measures.

Many legislative initiatives and federal regulations have been passed in recent decades (see Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, this issue) to provide students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum and to require the same accountability standards as for students who do not have disabilities. In spite of these mandates, surprisingly little progress has been made nationally toward educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Danielson & Bellamy, 1989; McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004; Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006). Most of the change that has occurred in educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms at a national level has occurred in 10 to 15 states, whereas the remaining states have made very little progress (McLeskey & Henry, 1999; McLeskey et al., 2004; Williamson et al., 2006). Furthermore, much of the progress that appears to have been made on a national level results largely from increasing identification rates for students with the
mildest disabilities, who continue to receive much of their education in general education classrooms after they are identified with a disability (McLeskey et al., 2004).

Much of this lack of progress has been attributed to the failure on the part of general and special educators to change general education classrooms and make them more accommodating for students with disabilities (Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxen, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002b; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Burstein et al. state that currently available evidence suggests that “general education teachers feel unprepared to serve students with disabilities, have little time available to collaborate, and make few accommodations for students with special needs” (p. 104). Indeed, it is apparent that effecting and sustaining these changes has proven much more difficult than educators, researchers, or policy makers anticipated.

We would speculate that there are two major causes for this lack of progress in developing more inclusive programs. First, most mainstreaming and inclusive programs have been developed primarily by special educators as add on programs, without the substantive input of general educators (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, 2002b). Research related to school change reveals that such programs result in superficial change, or what Goodman (1995, p. 1) has called “change without difference,” which is infrequently sustained over time. In contrast, research on school change reveals that lasting, substantive change must transform current school practices, and cannot simply be an add-on (Fullan, 2001; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002b). More specifically, successful school change must alter not only organizational structures and policies related to individual schools, but also must alter the role and responsibilities of teachers, curriculum used in the classroom, methods for grouping students for instruction, attitudes and beliefs of teachers, and so forth. Such changes require teachers to reflect deeply on the changes that are made, and to incorporate these changes into their beliefs about schooling (Borko, 2004; Richardson & Placier, 2001) and their understanding about the culture of their school (Fullan, 2001; Sarason, 1982, 1990).

A second reason for the failure to successfully change schools is the perception on the part of many special educators that effective practices need to be identified and described for teachers, who will then proceed to implement the practices in classrooms (Boudah, Logan, & Greenwood, 2001; Carnine, 1997; Fuchs, Fuchs, Harris, & Roberts, 1996; Greenwood & Abbott, 2001). This empirical–rational approach to professional development (Chin & Benne, 1969) has proven to be largely ineffective, as the perspective that teachers are vessels into which knowledge is poured by an expert has resulted in little change in the practices of teachers (Borko, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002a; Richardson & Placier, 2001). In contrast to this approach, several researchers have noted the need to situate professional development within the context of a larger school change effort (Borko, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, 2002a) that increases the likelihood that changes will occur in classroom practices that have a productive effect on student outcomes, and ensures that teachers and administrators will assume ownership of the changes that are made. This normative–reeducative approach (Chin and Benne, 1969) assumes that changes in teacher behavior result when professional development focuses “on providing autonomy for and cultivating growth in the people who make up the system and on increasing the problem solving capabilities of the system” (Richardson & Placier, 2001, p. 905).

Thus, research on school change and professional development has helped educators understand why add-on efforts at change have not worked, and have pointed the way toward the need for more comprehensive approaches to school change. More important, this research has provided new directions for developing effective, sustainable programs that improve educational outcomes for all students, and provide the necessary support so that general education classrooms may be changed to accommodate a broader range of student needs.

This article provides a description of one approach to comprehensive school reform (CSR) that has been used to develop programs that support a diverse range of students, including students with disabilities, in general education classrooms.
Before describing this approach to school change, a brief description of and definition for CSR in general education will be provided, as well as a brief discussion of the impact this movement has had on special education. This will be followed by a description of the approach used by McLeskey and Waldron (2000, 2002b) to develop what they have called inclusive school programs (ISPs). Finally, a brief review of research related to the effectiveness of the ISP model of school reform will be provided.

What Is CSR?

Over the past 2 decades, the two most important educational reform movements in general education have often been competing and contradictory (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). One of these approaches has emphasized top-down efforts to improve schools through changes in policies such as increased standards and regulations, increased core requirements, and lengthened school day and year (Desimone, 2004). In contrast to this top-down, policy-driven approach to educational reform, the second approach has emphasized local control over reforms, emphasizing approaches such as decentralized decision making and school-based management (Borman et al., 2003).

CSR efforts have been described as a third wave of educational reform, designed to reconcile these previous reform efforts. “The general spirit of today’s reform efforts continues to articulate top-down standards, which dictate many of the changes in the content of schooling, but fundamentally leaves the process of school change up to the discretion of local educators” (Borman et al., 2003, p. 126). More specifically, CSR “focuses on improvement of entire schools rather than on particular populations of students within schools; and it is not limited to particular subjects, programs, or instructional methods” (Desimone, 2004, p. 433). Furthermore, it is assumed that special education in general and students with disabilities in particular will be a part of these reform efforts (Koh & Robertson, 2004), so that improvements in schools will have a positive effect on all students.

CSR and Special Education

The impact of the CSR movement on special education and students with disabilities has recently begun to be documented by researchers. In some instances, there is evidence that certain approaches to CSR explicitly target and attempt to address the needs of some students with disabilities (often those with mild disabilities) in inclusive settings (e.g., “Success for All” [Slavin & Madden, 2000a]; “Roots and Wings” [Slavin & Madden, 2000b]), whereas other models include statements of philosophy that are strongly aligned with inclusive practices (e.g., Coalition of Essential Schools [Sizer, 1992]). However, in spite of the emphasis on all students in many models of CSR, students with disabilities are often not part of reform efforts, and when special education is considered, inclusion is most often not a focus (Doyle & Owens, 2003; Koh & Robertson, 2004).

As a result of the lack of responsiveness of CSR models to students with disabilities, models of CSR have begun to emerge that have a primary focus on inclusion and making general education classrooms more accommodating for all students, including those with disabilities (Jorgenson, 1998; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, 2002a; Peterson, 2000). The following section provides a brief description of one of these models that has been implemented in over 40 schools in several school districts.

One Approach to CSR With a Focus on Inclusion

McLeskey and Waldron (2000, 2002a) have worked collaboratively with teachers and administrators for the past 15 years to develop more effective programs that address a diverse range of student needs in general education classrooms. This work has resulted in the development of a systematic process for school change that has been successfully used in many schools. This approach to systematic school change is built on several principles that have guided the work (McLeskey
Waldron, 2000, 2002a, 2002b). These principles include the following.

1. To be successful, change must have the support of central office administrators, the building principal, and teachers. This suggests that top-down and bottom-up support are necessary, and addresses the contradictory nature of previous reform efforts. Furthermore, this principle suggests that the active support of the local school principal and a large proportion of teachers is needed before any attempt at CSR begins.

2. Schools must be empowered to manage their own change. Although educators from outside the local school may provide accountability measures, local schools are given the responsibility to determine how their school will change to meet these standards. This assures that changes will be built on the perceived strengths of the local school, and that local school personnel will own and thus support these changes.

3. School change efforts that address inclusion must address improving a school for all students, and not just for students with disabilities. If students with disabilities are to be an integral part of the academic and social community of the local school (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000), changes to provide support for these students cannot be made in isolation. Moreover, if such an add-on approach to change is used, students with disabilities become even more marginalized in the school, these changes are not integrated into the overall culture of the school, and most often the changes are not sustained. Simply put, any substantive change that is made in a school influences all students, thus it is not possible to address the needs of students with disabilities in isolation. Using a comprehensive approach to school reform also recognizes the pragmatic perspective of the classroom teacher, who is not interested in addressing only the needs of students with disabilities (or any single group of students, for that matter, however defined) but has much more interest in approaches that help him or her address the needs of all students in his or her class.

4. Change must be tailored to the particular needs of students and the expertise of educators within each school. There is no fixed model to guide change. Change in special education has long been viewed as the identification of a model or evidence-based practice that is presented to teachers and then used in the classroom. Ample evidence indicates that this approach to change does not work (Fuchs et al., 1996; Fullan, 2001; Gersten, Chard, & Baker, 2000), as it fails to recognize the complexity of schools and the power of local teachers and administrators to influence substantive changes in their schools (Goodman, 1995; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002a). Moreover, any model or approach to change must be subject to the needs and strengths of the local school, and will thus be adapted as it is implemented in a given setting.

5. Changes must be built on proven effective practices. Research conducted over the past several decades has provided much information regarding effective instructional practices (e.g., see Bond & Castagnera, this issue). Many of these practices are designed to improve academic outcomes for students who struggle to learn in general education classrooms, and are thus beneficial for students with disabilities and others who lack the skills to be successful in general education classrooms.

6. Changes should focus on making differences ordinary throughout all school settings for all students. The development of genuine, inclusive classrooms that accommodate the needs of all students should result in classrooms in which “wide-ranging differences are accommodated as a natural part of the classroom day” (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002b, p. 68). To make classrooms more accommodating, resources may be added to the classroom (e.g., coteaching or adding a paraeducator), or alterations may be made in classroom curriculum, instruction, or organization (e.g., class-wide peer tutoring, cooper-
ative learning). In these classrooms, what counts as special may not stand out. As Pugach (1995) has noted, “One measure might be the degree to which observers cannot tell, and do not need to be interested in, which students were formerly labeled as having a disability” (p. 220).

Thus, general education classes are transformed, and become settings in which a broad range of differences are an ordinary part of the school day.

**Ten Steps Toward Developing an ISP**

With the six guiding principles in mind, we work with schools using a systematic approach to change. It is important to note that although we suggest that schools use the following 10-step approach to achieve this change, we encourage teachers and local administrators to adapt this approach to the particular needs of their local school (see principle 4, p. 272). For a more detailed description of the 10-step approach to school change, see McLeskey and Waldron (2000).

**Begin With a Discussion of Schooling for All Students**

At the beginning of the change process, we encourage teachers and administrators in local schools to have an open and full discussion of schooling for all students. The ultimate purposes of this discussion are to ensure support for beginning the change process, to determine specific areas (e.g., more accommodating general education classrooms, better behavior throughout the school, improved reading achievement) that should be the focus of initial change efforts, and to begin the development of a shared vision for the successful education of all students. This discussion ensures that all teachers understand and appreciate the fact that all students are important (including students with the full range of disabilities), and that change to accommodate and better support all students requires major changes in their school. We encourage teachers and administrators at this point to develop a brief vision statement that will guide their deliberations. For example, “The goal of this school change activity is to prepare and support teachers to better meet the needs of all students who enter their classrooms.” This discussion should continue throughout the change process, and should serve to facilitate several of the steps that follow, as the plan for CSR is developed and implemented.

**Form a Team**

Ideally, every teacher and administrator in a school should be involved in each decision as a CSR effort moves forward. However, time constraints make this impossible. The best alternative we have identified is to have a group of well respected teachers and administrators who are representative of the many perspectives that exist within the school to form a core planning team to guide the change effort. Initially, the team should develop knowledge and skills regarding the change process, as well as skills in group process and management. This planning team will provide leadership as the change process progresses.

**Examine Your School**

One of the first activities of the planning team should be to examine their own school. We have found that it is rare that any teacher or administrator fully understands all of the issues that face a school across grade levels and subject areas. This process can ensure that the critical issues that exist within the school are brought to the attention of the planning team and addressed by this group. Examining the local school will also serve to ensure that as changes occur, the planning team will be sensitive to existing workloads. It will provide information regarding available resources and how they might be used more efficiently and effectively, and will provide stakeholders with the necessary information to develop a plan that is tailored to the needs and preferences of the entire school community. We have developed a comprehensive activity that we recommend planning teams use in
carrying out this process (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).

**Examine Other Schools**

We have found that one of the most powerful influences on school change is having staff from a reforming school visit, observe, and interact with staff from a school that has successfully completed CSR. These visits provide teachers and administrators the opportunity to explore the “nuts and bolts” of change with educators who have been through the process, as well as to observe how other schools have implemented such change. This gives teachers a mental picture of the result of such a school change effort, and helps them to realize that such change is possible. School visits also serve to give planning team members ideas about possible changes that may work in their school, as well as changes that they want to avoid.

**Develop a Plan**

After the first four steps, school planning teams are ready to gather together the information they have collected and develop a plan for change in their school. This plan should be comprehensive and detailed, and should address how school organization, curriculum and instruction, teacher roles and responsibilities, and so forth will be changed to better meet the needs of all students. Furthermore, this plan should include documented effective practices and address the need to provide professional development and related support to teachers so that they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach successfully as school change occurs.

**Review and Discuss the Plan**

**With the School Community**

One of the realizations that occurs to many planning team members once they have developed a plan for CSR is that they become outsiders, and have to work to bring other members of the school community up to speed regarding the proposed changes. To ensure the ownership of the plan for change by the entire school community, it is important that the plan be a working document, and that the entire school community have input into the final plan. This ensures that all voices are heard, and maximizes the extent to which members of the school community feel ownership for the plan.

**Incorporate Changes Into the Plan**

The length of stages 6 and 7 will vary, depending on the extent to which the entire school community has been kept up to date regarding the work of the planning team as the plan for CSR is developed, and the extent to which the school community finds the plan acceptable. There are two important factors to consider at this stage. First, there will always be concern and disagreement with any plan for CSR. The planning team and school principal must make a judgment regarding when to move ahead with the plan, even through support is not unanimous. Some schools vote on a final plan, and only move forward if a certain proportion (one half, two thirds, or three fourths) of the faculty support the plan. Another important factor to consider is that the plan will never address all issues or be perfect, and should continue to be subject to change, even (perhaps especially) after implementation (for more on this, see step 10). Fullan (2001) suggests that a ready, fire, aim approach to change is a reasonable approach at this stage, to ensure that school planning teams do not spend too much time planning, in an attempt to develop a perfect plan. In short, planning teams should carefully develop a plan and take into account everything that seems important but anticipate that once the plan is implemented new issues will arise that will require changes in the plan.

**Get Ready**

Many schools have developed their plans for change during the fall and winter semesters of one year, and implemented the plans in the fall of the following year. This provides time during the spring and summer for professional development and additional planning as teachers and administrators get ready for the changes that will occur.
Possible topics for professional development may include teaming and coteaching, classroom accommodation for diverse student needs, curricular adaptations, behavior management strategies, and so forth. Furthermore, teachers will need planning time to work with colleagues to discuss and plan the curriculum and instructional changes that are to occur.

Implement the Plan

As we noted previously, schools typically implement the plan they have developed during the fall of the school year, after careful planning through several months during the previous school year. It is important that teachers who are collaborating to support the newly implemented plan have common planning time to address issues that arise as the plan is implemented.

Monitor, Evaluate, and Change the Plan, as Needed

Finally, teachers and administrators must ensure that ongoing time is available for the planning teams as well as for teachers who are intimately involved in implementation so that the plan may be monitored, evaluated, and changed, as needed. This ensures the effectiveness of the ISP in improving student outcomes, and provides data on needed changes in the program.

Outcomes of CSR Using the ISP Model

Approximately a third of the 40 elementary, middle, and high schools with whom we have worked have made substantive changes in their overall school as they have developed and implemented CSR plans. Another third of the schools have made more modest changes (e.g., changes at two grade levels or across two teams in a middle school). The final third of the schools have made very few changes, and we would characterize the ISP model as largely ineffective for those schools (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002b). This finding is not unusual (Fullan, 2001; Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997), as previous research suggests that comprehensive school efforts are met with different levels of success across schools (Borman et al., 2003).

Our research with respect to the ISP schools indicates that student outcomes are at least as good, and often better when students are in inclusive programs, when compared to separate class special education programs. For example, we compared the achievement of students with learning disabilities in three ISP elementary schools with students in three schools that used traditional, pull-out special education programs (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). We found that students with milder learning disabilities made more progress in reading in the ISP schools, whereas students with more severe learning disabilities made comparable academic progress across the two settings.

A further study investigated teachers’ perspectives on the educational progress students with disabilities made in ISP schools (Waldron, McLeskey, & Pacchiano, 1999). Teachers in six ISP elementary schools were interviewed regarding a range of issues. The teachers “strongly supported the perspective that students with disabilities made significant gains related to their academic achievement skills during the school year, with most students surpassing the expectations of their general and special education teachers” (p. 145). These teachers felt that increased expectations and exposure to a broader range of curriculum had a positive influence on the students’ achievement and placed more emphasis on factors other than academic test scores when describing the effects of the ISP. Furthermore, the teachers noted that although changes in students’ behavior might not translate directly into improved test scores, specific behaviors such as better general organizational skills, improved study skills, and a greater willingness to take risks, were important for the long-term success of the students. Teachers in the ISPs believed that students without disabilities benefited academically and socially from placement in these programs (McLeskey, Waldron, So, Swanson, & Loveland, 2001; Waldron et al., 1999). Other investigations have also revealed that students without disabilities, especially low-achieving students, often benefit academically from placement in a well de-
signed inclusive program (e.g., see Janney & Snell, this issue).

Teachers also addressed the social behavior of students in the ISP schools, along with the relationships they had with other students. The teachers had no general concerns about increased behavior problems, with several noting that the behavior of many of the students with disabilities had improved. They believed that the students were influenced by positive models of appropriate behavior in general education classrooms, as well as the desire to fit in. A small number of students did present significant issues for teachers due to their aggressive, disruptive behaviors. Some of the teachers were able to make adaptations in their classrooms to address these issues, whereas in other instances students were removed from general education classrooms, a typical scenario for all of the ISPs where we have worked. Although the vast majority of students can be successfully included, some students present such difficult challenges that teachers and support personnel cannot design a program to successfully meet their needs.

Teachers also stated that students with disabilities were fitting in better in their classes than many of the teachers had anticipated they would, although it did not occur immediately or automatically. Teachers took an active role in helping students build friendships with other students with disabilities, as well as students without disabilities. Several teachers noted that “the social skills and friendships which students with disabilities were developing in the general education classroom were critical preparation for life, and were the most positive outcome of the ISP” (Waldron et al., 1999, p. 149).

Finally, we have conducted research on teachers’ support for the ISPs that were developed in their schools (McLeskey et al., 2001; Waldron et al., 1999). These investigations were designed to study teachers’ perspectives on well developed inclusive programs, and did not attempt to address general teacher attitudes toward inclusion, or attitudes toward less successful programs. For more information, see Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996. The investigations revealed that teachers were strongly supportive of the inclusive programs in their schools. For example, we surveyed teachers in three ISP schools, and compared their responses to teachers in three schools with traditional special education programs. The teachers in the ISP schools were significantly more positive regarding inclusive programs than the teachers from the traditional schools. Teachers in the ISP schools had significantly more positive perspectives regarding how well prepared they were to teach in an inclusive classroom, and had significantly fewer concerns about their possible roles and functions in the inclusive program. In addition, teachers in the ISP schools had significantly more positive perspectives on how the ISP would influence student outcomes. Interviews with teachers in six ISP schools provided further support for these findings (Waldron et al., 1999). These teachers had strong, positive perspectives on the impact the ISP had on student academic outcomes and behavior.

Conclusion

Preliminary research on one approach to CSR that focuses on making general education classrooms more accommodating for all students (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, 2002b), including those with disabilities, suggests that this approach has the potential to provide teachers and administrators with a framework to develop successful, sustainable inclusive programs. However, more research is needed to further document the effectiveness of this and other approaches to CSR, as very limited research is available at present. In particular, additional research is needed to document the effectiveness of different approaches to CSR, as well as the effectiveness of these approaches to school change across settings (e.g., urban/rural/suburban, elementary/secondary), and using a range of outcome measures (e.g., content area measures in secondary schools, measures of social–behavioral outcomes).

The lack of progress that has been made in the past 30 years toward educating students with disabilities in less restrictive settings strongly suggests that new approaches to developing inclusive programs are needed. Although CSR is a time-
intensive, school-by-school approach to change, it offers much promise as a framework that may be used by principals and teachers to develop successful, sustainable inclusive programs. Preliminary evidence suggests that these programs have the potential to improve educational outcomes for all students, especially those who make less than desired academic progress and struggle to meet current accountability goals.

References


