

## **PROJECT COLAB**

### **Introduction**

The critical shortage of high-quality, licensed special education teachers in this country is documented in numerous reports and studies. The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) emphasizes that 200,000 special education teachers will be needed by the year 2005, with 85% of all school districts currently having unfilled positions in the area. The National Academy of Sciences Study on Minority Students in Special Education (2002) reports that in those states where large numbers of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds live in poverty, placement of students in special programs is disproportionate, teacher shortages are critical, and many teachers are under-prepared. In developing Project COLAB, a plan for addressing these needs, faculty at New Mexico State University first considered national and state teacher shortages in special education.

### **National Teacher Shortages in Special Education**

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school districts have faced shortages of qualified special education teachers who could meet the growing number of children covered by the law. Information published by the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education indicates that special education teachers have consistently been in demand so much so that the field been designated as a critical shortage teaching area. Data from the U. S. Department of Education (2001) suggests that nearly 30,000 special education positions in the United States are either vacant or filled with teachers who are not certified. According to the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002), 200,000 special education teachers will be needed by the year 2005. Compounding the shortage of trained, licensed special education teachers is the rapid retirement and attrition of personnel from

the field. Eleven percent of licensed special education teachers leave annually compared to 6% of general education teachers (Crutchfield, 1997).

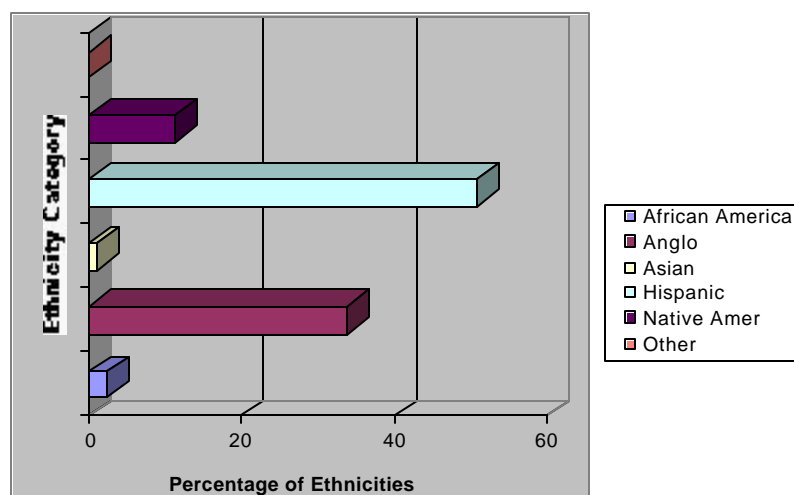
The lack of highly qualified, licensed K-12 teachers in special education is made more complex when one considers the needs of rural, culturally diverse, and impoverished communities. A report by the National Academy of Sciences Study on Minority Students in Special Education (2002) suggests that in those states where large numbers of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds live in poverty, minority students are disproportionately represented in special education classrooms, and the quantity and the quality of teachers is compromised. Though several factors contribute to the over-inclusion of minority students in special education, it is often true that their school performance suffers due to insufficient training, low expectations, and less effective instruction by teachers who may not be adequately prepared to work with high-needs students (Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997).

### **State Needs in Special Education**

The need for increased numbers of highly qualified special education teachers in New Mexico is documented by the N.M State Department of Education (2001). There are over 320,000 students enrolled in 89 school districts in New Mexico's public schools. Of those students, approximately 19% are in special education, 9% more than the national average (New Mexico Accountability Report, 2000-2001). Of these students, 90% are considered to have "high incidence" disabilities---learning disabilities, behavior/emotional disorders, communication disorders, or mild mental retardation. They are pupils who are served, to the greatest extent possible, with their non-disabled peers in general education settings. Students in special education in New Mexico are impacted by several factors: (a) linguistic and cultural diversity, (b) poverty, and (c) lack of sufficient numbers of fully-prepared teachers. Targeting high-quality

education in New Mexico is a major challenge when considering the special needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities. The N.M. State Department of Education reports student enrollment in the State as 33.7% Anglo, 50.7% enrollment by district is detailed in Table Hispanic, 11.3% Native American, 2.3% Black, 1% Asian, 0.9% Other (Figure 1).

Figure 2. NM School Enrollment



In special education in New Mexico, 68% come from “minority” groups implying an over-representation in certain categories of disability. According to Yates (1998) a disproportionate number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are inappropriately referred to and placed in special education by inexperienced and misinformed teachers. Often, not only is the teacher uneducated about minority issues, but in overwhelming numbers, is not from the same racial, ethnic or linguistic group as the students. A nationwide study of ethnicity of special education teachers and their pupils revealed that while over 30% of all special education students come from diverse backgrounds, 86% of the teachers are Anglo (Cook & Boe, 1995). Therefore, in order to target minority teacher candidates, it was important to employ recruitment strategies in Project COLAB that would access all populations.

In New Mexico, instruction in special education is obscured by the large numbers of ethnic students in special education classrooms. There are two problems with this situation. First, lack of familiarity with or sensitivity to a child's language and culture can result in poor-quality instruction, less student performance, and inappropriate referrals to special education. Secondly, once accepted into a special education program, the negative effects of over-inclusion can impair student performance because of placement in separate and unequal tracks that sometimes deny them access to the general education curriculum. So, for minority students who are over-included due to language/cultural differences and for minority students who are truly disabled, the need for high-quality teachers in high-need districts is great.

For the many "minority" students in special education in New Mexico, their disabilities and cultural diversity are compounded by poverty. In the State as a whole, nearly 25% of all children live in poverty. Forty-six percent of all of New Mexico's children receive free lunches, and 9.7% reduced lunches. In Doña Ana County, where NMSU is located, 34.4% of children live in poverty, with districts reporting anywhere from 56% to 92.5% of children receiving free and reduced lunches. In surrounding districts, Luna County (Deming/Silver City) has nearly 47% of children living in poverty, and Sierra County (T or C), 32%.

In the National Academy of Sciences report, *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* (2002), Hilliard states that schools with higher concentrations of low-income minority children are less likely to have experienced, well-trained teachers. He additionally notes that pupil expenditure in low-income schools are lower, therefore the need for high quality teachers is greater. Implications for New Mexico are that teachers in high- need schools must be prepared to ensure that children receive highly intensive intervention before referral to special education in

order to reduce over-identification of minorities. Teachers should also be prepared to



culturally relevant instruction, so that those children already in special education classrooms are presented with the greatest opportunities to learn.

### **Project COLAB—the Program**

One of the greatest challenges faced in education in New Mexico is the lack of licensed, fully prepared teachers in special education. As noted previously, children receiving special education services in the State are often from ethnic minority backgrounds living in poverty. The fact that nearly 300 special education positions in New Mexico go unfilled each year, and anywhere from 10 to 60% of special education teachers are working with emergency licenses, seriously compromises the quality of education students receive (NM Teacher Education Accountability Council, 2001). As a result, faculty at New Mexico State University developed Project COLAB. It will be described in terms of its goals, activities, and outcomes.

#### **COLAB Goals**

Project goals include:

1. Recruitment and selection of 25 teachers currently teaching special education on emergency licenses, or waivers in New Mexico.
2. Selection and utilization of certified, general education and special education mentor teachers.
3. Training of 25 Masters level teachers on waivers through on-campus coursework and through site-based professional development workshops.
4. Provision of mentoring on-site, on-line, and through monthly meetings.
5. Supervision of field experiences on-site in teachers' classrooms.
6. Evaluation of program.
7. Dissemination of program results.

### **COLAB Activities**

Waivered teachers were recruited and trained through various means. Because the population of teachers and students is culturally diverse, the program was advertised in area Spanish and English language media. Brochures went out to all school districts in the region (a six-county area). Public meetings were held with area school administrators and human resources personnel. Teachers and mentors applied using forms relevant to their respective needs and goals. Once admitted to the program, to the NMSU Graduate School, and the Department of Special Education/Communication Disorders, each waivered teacher was assigned a project mentor and a faculty advisor. Constant contact was kept between the teacher and his/her advisor and mentor. On-site observations were conducted by the mentors, and face-to-face meetings held to discuss instructional and professional needs. Appropriateness of instruction for minority students with disabilities was stressed. On-line support was available through the NMSU/COLAB web site, and through e-mail interactions. Progress in academic coursework was overseen by the faculty advisor. Monthly professional development workshops were available at each of four locations, covering topics identified as important by mentors and teachers. Project evaluation has been conducted formatively and summatively through the use of Likert scale questionnaires covering program content, materials, personnel, and professional development activities. Project COLAB information has been disseminated by participants at several national conferences, including the Council for Exceptional Children's Conference in New York City and the Teacher Education Division (CEC) in Savannah.

### **Outcomes**

All 25 COLAB teachers will have completed Master's degrees plus licensure in special education by the Spring, 2003. Mentors have reported gaining considerable information on

individualizing instruction, curriculum, materials, and cultural relevancy. As a result of the project, many mentors have themselves taken coursework in support areas such as counseling and administration, thereby extending the effect of the project beyond the teachers seeking licensure. Overall, the Project has successfully supported over 50 individuals and given them new avenues to work successfully with students with disabilities. As such, Project COLAB is considered a real success!

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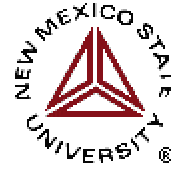
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**PROJECT COLAB:**

**Training Special Educators As Fast As We Can**

**2003 Hawaii International Conference on Education**

**Conference Proceedings**

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