

## **Opening Doors: Learning Specialists' Role in Supporting Students from Underresourced Communities**

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As demographics change and schools look to serve the full range of students' needs, one key to student retention and success has been found in the learning center. While students from underserved populations typically enter independent schools with strong academic credentials, some quickly recognize that their educational backgrounds are different from those of their peers. Students from less enriched academic backgrounds can be suddenly confronted by the inequity in American school systems. If then faced with disappointing grades, they can experience shame – what psychiatrist Ned Hallowell (2005) calls “that most disabling of conditions” – and can rapidly shut down academically or interpersonally. Meeting with a learning specialist can help students reframe the experience from “I’m not smart” to “I just haven’t learned that yet,” and allow the student to develop growth mindset strategies that can directly address the areas of weakness. With independent skills in hand, the student can proceed with confidence and the critical power of self-efficacy. Years ago, the White Privilege Conference of 2009, (Springfield, MA) raised the question: “How will the school help a capable student from a less privileged background feel confident and competent in a classroom with peers from an enriched educational environment?” It remains a critical question, and for many, learning specialists may hold the key.

Uniquely trained to pinpoint weaknesses and provide research-based, direct instruction in academic skills, experienced learning specialists are well positioned to help any student - including those from underserved sending schools - to recognize and address their weaknesses as well as to capitalize on their strengths. According to the 2012 Survey of Independent School Learning Specialists, over 90 percent spend their days providing direct services to students in the development and implementation of global academic skills. Half of them communicate at least weekly with parents and teachers regarding the students they serve - nurturing that critical relationship between the family, the student, and the school - and helping to ensure that all are working together to support the student on the path to success. Over 50 percent of those surveyed specifically work on building the non-cognitive and executive functioning skills that Paul Tough finds so malleable in the teen years and so critical to the success of students in stress-inducing, unfamiliar settings (NEALS, 2012). "Pure I.Q. is stubbornly resistant to improvement after about age eight. But executive functions and the ability to handle stress and manage strong emotions can be improved, sometimes dramatically, well into adolescence and even adulthood." (Tough, 48) Learning specialists routinely provide the training in executive functioning and academic resilience that lead struggling students to thrive.

Due to programmatic or financial constraints, many administrators must require learning specialists, their teachers best trained in the identification and remediation of obstacles to learning, to serve only those students whose parents can pay for enrollment in a support program. In a land of what Jonathan Kozol originally coined as American Apartheid in his 1991 book, Savage Inequalities - educational practices where rural and suburban students outpace students from the inner city on nearly every measure of academic achievement - many members of the Northeast Association of Learning Specialists have become inventive crusaders. Some directors have opened their learning centers to all students regardless of their ability to pay, while others cannot afford to do so. One consulting specialist provided support pro bono to students on scholarship for years until the school invited all parents to apply left over school bank account monies to a fund for academic support. Through direct instruction and through consultation with teachers, learning specialists help to ensure that all classrooms provide appropriate instruction not only in

content, but in the metacognitive skills necessary to help students truly assimilate information. As students and teachers gain a common language to describe the process of learning, they also gain the ability to target points where learning may falter. In conjunction with the learning specialist, the teacher and the student can review the steps of skill development, find the point of breakdown, and develop strategies to ensure the path to success.

At his July 2013 orientation meeting for parents from the city nervously preparing their children to attend boarding schools throughout the Northeast, Bill Mitchell, Associate Director of Educational Services for the Boys Club of New York in East Harlem, encouraged parents to explore their schools' learning centers. He shared, "one of our greatest success stories....a peer mentor heading to Lafayette College... would not have made it through his first two years without the expert guidance of his learning specialist." Offering pro bono services or tapping unexpected resources, learning specialists identify and serve students who arrive in independent schools with academic deficits that, if due to inadequate preparation, ironically disqualify them from being identified with a learning disability and from gaining access to services that are restricted to students with disabilities only. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) remind us that: "[students] come to the classroom first looking for things like affirmation, affiliation, accomplishment, and autonomy. They are looking for adults who accept them, value them, guide them, and represent for them what it means to be a competent and caring adult." Learning specialists can help to bridge cultural gaps that undermine students' search for those ideals in their new schools.

The power of independent schools to impact American society is never more poignant than in the gains made by students from underserved populations who initially struggle not only with a new academic playing field but also, at times, with cultural disconnects that spill out of the classroom. Uniquely unconditional weekly one-on-one meetings with well-trained learning specialists utilizing research-based strategies and psychosocial supports, such as what NYU psychologist Gabriele Oettingen calls Mental Contrasting, lead to a safe relationship and "the implementation intentions and optimism students need" to overcome the inevitable obstacles that might otherwise derail their dreams. Such support, according to Angela Duckworth (Oettingen, 2013), "creates a strong association between future and reality" for students, for independent schools, and for society. NAIS currently recognizes educational background, academic/social achievement, ability, and learning style as cultural identifiers that should be considered as schools strive to serve a diverse range of students. By allowing any enrolled student, regardless of diagnosis, background, or ability to pay, to schedule an appointment with the learning specialist, we send a powerful message to our students - and to society - that independent schools are deeply invested in the success and the future of every one of our students, especially the most vulnerable.

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**At the time of this writing, 2013, Susan Cole Ross was a Learning Specialist and President of The NorthEast Association of Learning Specialists. Contributors Kara Ashley and Rebecca Plona were past Presidents**