



# LIGHTING THE PATH TO INCLUSION:

*How Beacons Embody  
Commitment to Students  
with Disabilities*

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The Center for  
Learner Equity



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*Formerly the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools*

## About the Center for Learner Equity

**The Center for Learner Equity** is working to ensure that public schools—both within the charter school sector and beyond—are designed with inclusivity and equity from the start. When we improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, all students benefit.

### **Mission**

We are committed to ensuring that students with disabilities, particularly those in under-resourced communities, have the quality educational opportunities and choices they need to thrive and learn. We accomplish this through research, advocacy, coalition formation, and capacity-building with national, state, and local partners.

### **Vision**

Students with disabilities will have the same opportunities for success as their peers.





## Foreword

Inclusion starts at the top, and when the deep commitment of school and districts leaders is absent, individual teachers' efforts to create and sustain inclusive learning environments where students with disabilities can soar risk being little more than exercises in frustration. With this premise in mind, this brief shares the voices of individuals we identified as “Beacons”—that is, leaders who have demonstrated a deep commitment to improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Their stories shed light onto the origins of their commitment, providing insight into how it translates into tangible actions designed to create learning environments in which all students can thrive. While some of their stories are similar, overall, their experiences document a rich and diverse pathway to inspiring leadership. It was a pleasure to spend time with the Beacons and have the opportunity to capture their stories and passions. **We hope they are contagious.**



# Project Background

Decades of research have established that school leaders are critical in creating robust, accessible, and inclusive educational environments for all students. Unfortunately, for a host of systemic and historical reasons, not all leaders share high expectations for our most complex learners: students with disabilities. Moreover, even those with the best intentions frequently lack the training and skills needed to realize such high expectations.

In seeking to remedy this situation, we have examined the “pipelines” that provide leaders to the U.S.’s 7,500 charter schools, specifically focusing on individuals whose personal stories can illuminate the path to inclusion for others.

In the first stage of this inquiry, we developed an inventory of 50 leadership pipelines, identifying their location, who they recruit, the duration of the programs, and details about their curriculum. We conducted in-depth interviews with about half of them (a synthesis of these findings can be found here: [Charting a Path to Equitable Education for Students with Disabilities](#)).

This publication, exploring the stories of individual leaders we call “Beacons,” is the next step of our research. We will conclude by developing content that pipeline programs can use to promote dramatic improvement in leaders’ ability to educate students with disabilities.





# Methodology

We identified the Beacons through recommendations stemming from outreach to our network of professionals. We did not attempt to identify a representative sample of Beacons or establish a standard definition but rather, given the exploratory nature of the inquiry, sought information-rich cases that could provide valuable insight into how Beacons developed their commitment to students with disabilities. We conducted initial outreach for recommendations and then developed profiles (e.g., each Beacon's current position, professional background, education, and demographics) based on the recommendations and a review of their LinkedIn™ page. Once we developed the profiles, we contacted the selected Beacons to request a 60-minute interview. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Dedoose™ in order to identify unique and recurring themes.



# Introducing our Beacons

We wanted to know more about leaders who succeed in improving outcomes for students with disabilities. What sparked their commitment? Where and how did they train? What attitudes, beliefs, and systems were central to their success? How could these be transmitted to and cultivated in emerging leaders?

We canvassed leaders working in charter schools and support organizations, including state and local education agencies and nonprofits that partner with public schools, and identified individuals perceived by their peers to be “Beacons” (i.e., those who have demonstrated exemplary efforts to educate students with disabilities). We then narrowed the pool to produce a balanced interview group of 16 Beacons representing a diversity of experience and perspectives.



# Introducing our Beacons

Our Beacons come from various backgrounds, but they all share a common thread: a commitment to changing the status quo for students with disabilities. Some began their career in education with that commitment in mind, others developed it further along in their career as a result of exposure to a particular student with a disability through their work or in their personal lives.

- Of the 16 Beacons we interviewed, four have degrees in special education, while six have another education degree. Another six have an unrelated degree and were either trained by a leadership pipeline or entered the education field later in their career.
- It does not appear that gaining a special education degree correlates with notably stronger commitment to students with disabilities. In fact, most of the Beacons indicated that on-the-job training and hands-on experience interacting with students with disabilities were the strongest drivers of their commitment.
- The Beacons have followed a variety of career paths. A majority (14) of the Beacons we interviewed began as teachers and climbed the ladder into leadership roles at their respective schools. Eventually, they founded and/or led a higher-education program, nonprofit, or charter network. Four Beacons entered education through alternative certification programs, including Teach for America and the Boston Teacher Fellows Program. These routes provided a surprising advantage: Placing candidates in understaffed schools resulted in frequent on-call service for diverse student populations when compared with the single student-teaching assignment typically found in traditional preparation programs.
- Two of our Beacons began their careers far afield. They were management consultants who discovered a passion for education and applied a different set of skills to improving outcomes for students with disabilities.



## The Beacons whose voices form the foundation of this report:

- Brooke Allen, *Founding Director of the Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC), Nashville, TN*
- Toni Barton, *Dean of Special Education Leadership Programs, Relay Graduate School of Education, Pineville, LA*
- LaKendra Butler, *Founder and School Leader, Strive Collegiate Academy, Nashville, TN*
- Sam Drazin, *Founder and Executive Director of Changing Perspectives, Bradford, VT*
- Julie Fisher, *Executive Director, NYC Autism Charter School, New York, NY*
- Shannon Hodge, *Founding Executive Director of the DC Charter School Alliance; co-founder and executive director of Kingsman Academy Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.*
- Cristina de Jesus, *CEO of Green Dot Public Schools California, Los Angeles, CA*
- Lindsay Kruse, *Leadership, Strategy and Program Design Consultant, Princeton, NJ*
- Erin Larkin-Maguire, *Relay Graduate School of Education, New York, NY*
- Emma Mac, *Principal, LEAD Charter Schools, Nashville, TN*
- Ben Marcovitz, *Former Chief Executive Officer, Collegiate Academies, New Orleans, LA*
- Marco Petruzzi, *Former CEO, Green Dot Public Schools Los Angeles, CA*
- Tommy Reddicks, *Executive Director, Paramount Schools of Excellence, Indianapolis, IN*
- Aqua Stovall, *Executive Director, Special Education Leader Fellowship (SELF), New Orleans, LA*
- Erin Studer, *Executive Director of Charter School Programs, CHIME Institute, Los Angeles County, CA*
- Jessica Tunney, *Founding Principal and Executive Director, TLC Public Charter School, Orange, CA*

Julie Fisher, Executive Director, NYC Autism Charter School, New York, NY





# What Lit the Flame?

*People go into education for a million different reasons. We wanted to know more about the sources of Beacons' commitment to focusing on students with disabilities. Among our Beacons, we found some common elements that catalyzed their decisions and set them on a path of service. While all share a commitment to social justice, the kindling was often set ablaze by one or both of the following two circumstances: direct, personal experience with a disability or early involvement in the education of students with disabilities in their workplace. Sometimes, those early workplaces shaped their thinking through guidance and mentors; in other cases, they came face-to-face with shocking examples of inequity that eventually motivated them to start their own schools and nonprofits.*

# Family & Friends

Relay's **Erin Larkin-Maguire** found her commitment sparked by a sister with a disability. She “navigated through that by constantly thinking ‘okay, what’s going on in your head? How do I need to change what I’m doing to get you what you need?’ “ That, she now says, is the “fundamental habit of mind of an effective special education teacher.”

**Sam Drazin** was born with Treacher Collins Syndrome (TCS), a rare congenital disorder resulting in both a facial anomaly and hearing loss. Now, as an educator, he’s seen “both sides of the desk,” benefitting from accommodations and supports as a student and then employing those same accommodations for his students with disabilities.

When **Toni Barton’s** (Relay) son entered first grade, his teacher approached her with concerns about his being “fidgety and falling out of the seat and touching the kids around him” and recommended that he be evaluated for special education. This was unknown territory for Toni, so she dove into the research on black boys and special education and was disturbed by what she found. She decided to move to Alexandria, Virginia, a more diverse community, and never heard anything again about fidgety behavior. This experience led Toni to the DC Teaching Fellows and then another teacher project, where she became a special education teacher by choice. Identifying a pattern of assigning unprepared teachers to special education classrooms, she moved on to become a principal a few years later, determined to change that very pattern.

For **Ben Marcovitz** formerly of Collegiate Academies, his commitment grew from having a daughter suffer a global brain injury at birth, which occurred just around the time when Ben began growing increasingly frustrated with the unequal success in the schools he founded: “I came into the year having had this experience where a doctor had said to me [there’s] a zero-percent chance your child will develop at all. Later, [he said] more like a 10-20% chance of development. So, there became nothing more important in our lives than giving every opportunity to my daughter for her to develop 100% of the way.” This is a commitment he extends to all the students he serves.



Sam Drazin, Founder & Executive Director  
of Changing Perspectives, Bradford, VT





Brooke Allen, Founding Director of the Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC), Nashville, TN

## Family & Friends

**Brooke Allen** of the Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC) was drawn to the special education sphere in elementary school, where she had a friend who was deaf. Brooke became intrigued by sign language and learning to communicate with her. Later, Brooke was a “buddy” at church for a girl with Down syndrome and realized that “this was a really great way to learn about and connect with people.”

**Aqua Stovall** of the Special Education Leader Fellowship (SELF) in New Orleans was diagnosed as a child with attention deficit hyperactivity and oppositional defiance disorder as well as a processing disability; she also has a cousin with Down syndrome. She grew up watching her family members, many of whom worked in education, treat both her and her cousin the same way they would treat any other child: as humans with the potential to do great things. That set the bar high for Aqua.

**Lindsay Kruse** began her career in consulting, but, after 9/11, she had what she called an “epiphany”: “At that time, we didn’t know if the world was going to end, and I asked myself, was this really what I wanted to be doing?” So, she acquired an MBA, intending to work on issues of youth and poverty, but she then began “going on the journey” of being a parent of two kids with disabilities. When her daughter’s condition was first identified, it was “scary and it was hard.” She and her husband were “two well-educated privileged people, both with feet in the education world, and it was like a foreign language.” This made her realize how much harder it must be for “folks who do not have all of the privileges and experience and networks and connections.” While her past work in education was really valuable, she realized that the system was still leaving a group of students behind, and she became committed to working for kids on the margins. Her real ah-hah moment came in a brief afterschool conversation with her daughter, who mentioned something about “the regular kids”: I literally pulled over the car and said ‘what do you mean the regular kids?’ And she said ‘the ones who don’t get pulled out of class.’ So, you know, that was the moment for me.”



# What They Saw at Work

Many Beacons had eye-opening experiences early in their careers, especially when seeing students with disabilities being treated unjustly and realizing that they could make a difference. Some were already exploring aspects of special education; Erin Studer, for example, was really interested in neurodiversity and used that discipline to inform his practice at CHIME Institute. Some learned from experienced teachers in their own schools, while others were simply thrown into an unfamiliar situation and had to get up to speed quickly. Whether their early experiences were positive or negative, they helped solidify the Beacons' commitment to students with disabilities. The common thread was a sense of humility about what they already knew, and an appetite to learn what was necessary to be truly effective.





Cristina de Jesus, CEO of Green Dot Public Schools California, Los Angeles, CA

As a student teacher, **Shannon Hodge** was told that a student in her class had bipolar disorder. She was given the following background: “Here’s the student, he’s bipolar. He has outbursts in class, and his parents don’t know what to do with him; so, the next big outburst he has, he’s probably going to be institutionalized. Good luck.” That was a lot of pressure for a 21-year-old student teacher, and Shannon worried that she might trigger him and land him in an institution. Watching and listening closely to her students, however, she discovered that the boy was a wonderful writer and that she could guide him to a calmer place through writing. That experience proved to be a game-changer in terms of her own commitment.

When Green Dot’s **Cristina de Jesus** first encountered students with disabilities in the classroom, she recognized that they needed a champion and advocate as well as a teacher. Her second year of teaching solidified that commitment when 20 of the 30 students in one of her blocks had [Individualized Education Programs] IEPs. She saw how underserved they were: “I learned what was needed and worked with the principal to get an aide in the classroom to support them and eventually got a co-teacher.”

**Emma Mac** always had a curiosity about how to best educate all learners, but she realized that her preparation hadn’t equipped her to be effective with complex learners. When she became a principal, she “knew that [she] had no experience in special education.” Taking the bull by the horns, she signed up for programs offered by the state education department and participated in a fellowship at Vanderbilt University focusing on school leadership preparation, including the legal aspects of special education. She stated that “it was really knowing that I didn’t know very much and then having strong special education teachers on my staff” that put her on the right path.



**Toni Barton** worked through another instance of inequity. When several DC public schools were closed and hers was combined with another school across the street, she found the new school's self-contained program for students with emotional disabilities unacceptable. After weighing whether to leave teaching altogether, she asked a professor from one of the alternative certification programs she attended if her students could apply to attend his fully inclusive school. He said yes but only if she came as well to be their teacher. She did just that, and two families came with her. Within two years, both students' behaviors decreased dramatically, with one of the students exiting special education and the other's classification changing from emotional disturbance to a specific learning disability in math. The former student is now attending Temple University. This was the result of staff who believed the least dangerous assumption about these students, high expectations, positive peer models, and a teacher committed to being excellent for them.

**Tommy Reddicks** had spent time teaching in several schools and designing curriculum “to keep it very frank, I was getting my ass kicked in the field and realized that there was a lot going on that I didn't know.” By the time he became an assistant principal, “I was radically underprepared to handle special education and, man, I needed to do a deep dive.”

**LaKendra Butler** was shaped by early exposure to injustice. Teaching in a comprehensive high school paired with a magnet, she saw that her students were not receiving the same education and resources as those on the magnet side, a reflection of demographic inequity: “Same students, same neighborhood, for the most part, but what we were being provided was definitely different from what they were being provided.” This reinforced her mindset that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or learning needs, deserve the same opportunities.

LaKendra Butler, Founder and School Leader,  
Strive Collegiate Academy, Nashville, TN





**Jessica Tunney** recalls working as a paraprofessional at a school in an underserved Philadelphia neighborhood:

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“We did academics in the morning and therapeutic activities in the afternoon. I was kind of untrained, as many were, and I noticed that afternoons, when they were really engaged during academics, were the only times the kids seemed to be relaxed and joyful. I wondered if learning itself was a therapeutic activity for kids. So, I became interested in special education because I was interested in the edges: What about this person, what about that way of doing it, what is it about these circumstances? Special education is all about those kinds of questions.”

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Finally, an important piece of context: One advantage shared by many Beacons in their early careers was the flexibility and freedom of the charter model.

**Brooke Allen** summed up this advantage when she reflected: “I started on a founding team of a charter school and loved the idea of writing the book for what we were going to do to serve kids well.”



# Turning Commitment to Action

*The warmest feelings and best intentions mean little if not translated into plans and implementation. Our Beacons provided solid advice about formal preparation programs but also emphasized another key ingredient: the attitudes and beliefs that drove them to action.*

## Frames of Mind

*Why does one individual face an obstacle and accept it as “the way the world is”, while another sees it as a call to action? Beacons clearly fall in the latter group, and ours described the attitudes and mindsets that enabled them to turn their commitment into concrete outcomes for students with disabilities.*



Jessica Tunney, Founding Principal & Executive Director, TLC Public Charter School, Orange, CA

### It starts from the top.

**Jessica Tunney:** “As a leader, I lean in hardest on modeling and working right alongside the rest of the staff; so, it is clear we are all on the same team. I try to work harder than anybody at the school. I have the utmost respect for the work of teaching and the work of being a paraprofessional. I've done almost everyone's job, except the office staff, so I'm trying to get up to speed on all the nuts and bolts that make the place work. We're learning together.”

### Advocacy is essential.

**Julie Fisher:** “We are advocates for our kids, which means that it's our responsibility to ensure that we give them the best opportunities we possibly can, and that we're always looking to set the bar as high as it can be without letting them fail.”

### Look for trouble.

**Erin Larkin-Maguire:** “This may sound like a deficit mindset, but I intentionally wanted to enter teaching in a place where schools were *not* functioning very well. I wanted to understand why they were not working...That's where I came to understand that kids need someone to speak up for them and tell that story for them in the rooms that they are not in and the places where they cannot go.”

### Welcome a challenge.

**Toni Barton:** “My commitment boils down to doing what is right for kids. I just have always felt compelled to do something about it versus just sitting there going along with it. It's just not in who I am . . . The system was set up to fail them, and I wanted to be a part of fixing the system.”

### Righteous indignation is okay.

**Lindsay Kruse:** “This is the part that baffles me. I understand that we have a lot more solid technical training today, but we figured it out for other challenges when there was no manual or technical training. When some of our highest-performing 1.0 charter schools started, there was just a leader who looked at how kids were being treated and said “This is bullshit! How are we not serving these kids? And they figured it out.”





Aqua Stovall, Executive Director,  
Special Education Leader Fellowship  
(SELF), New Orleans, LA

### Stick your neck out.

**Aqua Stovall:** “In order to adapt, you have to take risks. Successful leaders push against the grain. Good leaders across all sectors push against the grain, and, in order for us to keep moving forward, we need more principals to push against the grain.”

### Know that the kids are a joy, not a duty.

**Julie Fisher:** “I’ve found all the kids I worked with quirky and funny and engaging and even more interesting than typically developing kids!”

### Appreciate your opportunities.

**Ben Marcovitz:** “I feel incredibly lucky to be able to focus on improving things in schools without some of the obstacles others have traditionally faced.” He described looking for every possible way to help his daughter develop and applies that same mindset to running Collegiate Academies. “My personal experiences taught me the opportunities and progress a parent with resources can pursue for their own child with disabilities. I believe this is how all schools should approach each student. Each kid has a plan. Each will have every opportunity to be successful.”

### Know what you don’t know.

**Tommy Reddicks:** “I wish I’d known that I wasn’t a rock star. [I had] such a big ego—the big dog on campus. I needed to get beat up a little bit to get through it. You know a lot of coaches become principals. How many coaches are well versed in special-ed law? How many understand how to support the neediest of students when they spent their whole career supporting the elite students?”

### Persist!

Personal resilience is a big asset, as **Brooke Allen** found. She described her approach: “When Plan A does not work, and Plan B does not work, I’m ready with 10 more ideas that I’m going to try, and the sequence of those, and the creativity that comes with developing new solutions or strategies, is really where I find my pace.”



## Can Commitment be Cultivated?

**Lindsay Kruse**, whose daughter's innocent reference to "regular kids" opened her eyes, made a vital point: "We can't afford to wait till everybody has a personal epiphany. So how do we create that?"

*In organizations that succeed in educating students with disabilities, success depends not only on formal preparation but also on intangibles, such as a willingness to take risks and defy boundaries. Can these intangible characteristics be taught and learned? Our Beacons had a lot to say about how leaders are currently prepared as well as how to cultivate stronger leadership commitment, with many stressing the importance of hands-on experience*

Lindsay Kruse, Leadership, Strategy & Program Design Consultant, Princeton, NJ



## Preparation Programs

**Brooke Allen** highlighted a problem more specific to the charter sector: “In charter schools, a lot of leaders are promoted from within and given very little preparation. You went from teacher to suddenly being a rock star teacher, so you clearly will be a rock star leader! Sometimes, that works out really well, and, sometimes, it’s a quick way to burn out.

**Tommy Reddicks** painted a pretty dismal picture of the *status quo*:

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“You know, grad school 101 is ‘read something, write a paper on it, understand what the professor wants from it, learn to glean that professor’s perspective, get your A, and leave class’, but you could tweak that narrative a little bit and say ‘what you’re going to be writing on is a field experience observing special education, seeing how teachers work’ instead of reading a case study, doing a book report on the case study, and turning it in to get your grade.”

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Tommy Reddicks, Executive Director,  
Paramount Schools of Excellence,  
Indianapolis IN





## Preparation Programs

**Sam Drazin** worried that school leaders are not trained to understand the real range of disabilities they'll encounter: "I worked in a school that was 50% free and reduced price lunch. [There were] not necessarily a ton of visible disabilities but lots of learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disturbance. When school leaders think about disabilities, they often think about those visible, concrete disabilities—the kid who uses the wheelchair, the student with a visual impairment—but it's the milder ones, the invisible ones, that are much more prevalent, and, oftentimes, they're the ones who are much harder to create inclusive and equitable learning environments for."

Several Beacons found existing preparation for special education leadership too focused on compliance rather than the art of teaching, or, as one Beacon put it, "**how do you not get sued.**"

Even some compliance-oriented programs fail to make a sufficient distinction between law and policy, according to **Jessica Tunney**: "There's a difference between what's been done and what's allowable, and unless you understand that, you're at a loss as to what to do. For example, how do you write an IEP goal that's inclusive and doesn't paint you into a corner where you're either addressing the goal or doing what's right for the kid? We come up against that on a daily basis. Is it better for this child to practice their scripted question as it's written in their IEP, or is it better for this child to naturally invite a friend to play in a way that makes sense to them but isn't what their goals say they should be doing?"



# How to Rebalance Leader Preparation

*Along with their critiques, the Beacons offered some intriguing suggestions for resolving problems that dampen leaders' commitment and impede success for students with disabilities. Each of these ideas could form the basis for a multi-week-long seminar.*

## Authentic Connections With Individuals With Disabilities

*In addition to changes in content, the Beacons felt strongly that traditional, didactic preparation must be supplemented by direct experience in settings where students with disabilities are learning alongside their peers.*



Emma Mac, Principal,  
LEAD Charter Schools, Nashville, TN

**Toni Barton** calls for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between curriculum and special education: “If you have a kid who has a specific learning disability that affects math, the person who has the best expertise to teach that student, the person who understands math the best in your school, is typically not the special education teacher. So, we need to completely rethink how we prepare and assign teachers.”

**Emma Mac** wants to move away from one-dimensional programs and toward a recognition of the actual complexity of schools: “I would have loved some training to understand the different models that exist, not just in terms of ‘you can have co-teaching, or you can have pullout’ but rather how do you actually make those multiple things happen within the same school building at the same time. One of the hardest things for us was trying to figure out how to *design*. What could it look like to have a schedule where, in any given day, we have students who are self-contained some of the day and then pushing into the [general education] classroom some of the day? There are so many moving parts, and I really struggled with that.”

**Sam Drazin** asks: “How can we get these individuals into classrooms, in person? [Future leaders] need the whole picture. Oftentimes, they’ll send a candidate into a school but just into the special education resource room, or they go to a workshop where someone is working with students on the spectrum. That’s not realistic. Schools are diverse learning places, and we want all students together in the classroom. So, we need to provide these real-world experiences for principal and school leader candidates —instead of just going to observe [students] in siloes.”





**Erin Larkin-Maguire** shared a similar concern: “Novice teachers should not be put in a special education classroom for a lot of reasons,” one of which is that “if you're a special educator and all you have ever known is special education, you do not know where the bar should be for kids.”

**Jessica Tunney** described viewing early childhood as an opportune time to make these connections, a time where “there is a real opportunity to establish the joy in learning and the joy in discovering differences in others.” She believes that early childhood education is a unique space where children are open and able to embrace disability.

Organizations operating at scale can funnel additional resources toward this work. **Emma Mac** explained that, at LEAD, a network of six schools, “There is a diverse learners coordinator at the network level. They just take advantage of any opportunity to let people who need to know a lot more pick the brains of people who do know and listen and try new ideas.”



Marco Petruzzi, Former CEO, Green Dot Public Schools Los Angeles, CA

## And There's a Side Door Too.

**Marco Petruzzi** came into the education space later in his career after 20 years in the business sector, including time as a partner at Bain & Co. He originally joined Green Dot as a board member, focusing on organizational effectiveness and exploring how to build a talent pipeline as they scaled from one to many sites. He eventually took on the role of CEO, in part because he became emotionally involved in education issues and wanted to work more directly toward positive change. His business background came in handy when Green Dot took over Locke, the lowest-performing high school in California. By revamping its special education, in addition to undergoing many other changes, the school was able to curb its appalling dropout rate and educate far more students with disabilities in the general education classroom rather than segregated classrooms with limited access to the curriculum.

Not everyone who has emerged as a Beacon in this field started in education, and while formal preparation needs attention, it is important to relish the attitudes and skill sets these people bring into schools.

**Tommy Reddicks**, for example, was a music major in college expecting to play jazz saxophone:

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*“I loved improvisation. The whole goal with improvisation is that you're given set keys and key changes, and your job is to use the rules to make something cool happen. You can rearrange or repackage it, but you have to follow the rules. So, you know, I'm always improvising. That sounds like we'd be creating chaos, but it's about using the self-defined rules that you're given but still winning with them.” - Tommy Reddicks*

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## So, Now That You're a Leader . . .

*When school leaders design for the margins, their programs incorporate regular, relevant professional development. Staff members are required to grow in their understanding of the field. They receive regular training and networking opportunities to learn from the best. The following are some tips the Beacons provided for realizing a philosophy of inclusion at the school site.*



Erin Studer, Executive Director of Charter School Programs, CHIME Institute, Los Angeles County, CA

## Creating an Inclusive Culture

It starts with vision. Describing inclusion as an “operational framework by which you make all your decisions,” **Erin Studer** stressed the importance of having “a clearly articulated vision about your school and your goals for all kids. From there, create systems that support your mission and involve extensive collaboration across all staff members so that you are sharing information and knowledge and expertise in the service of all the kids. Understand that you collectively hold the outcomes of your students.”

None of this happens by accident. Several Beacons described an approach to planning that makes special education a central driver of the school rather than an afterthought—what they called “designing for the margins.” As **LaKendra Butler** said, “If you create your school around what’s best for students with disabilities, you’re going to create a school based on what’s best for all kids. If you educate yourself on what those things are and start to create structures around them, you will start to reach more students than you ever thought possible, because they are great teaching methods for all kids.”

**Brooke Allen** added that “viewing opportunities and access and experiences within your school from the lens of a student doesn’t just mean your average student, it means the whole range of students and how they experience your school. I think leaders will make a ton of different decisions.”

**Tommy Reddicks** thinks in terms of one population rather than general ed vs. special ed populations. He explained that if “we serve that one population in the same manner that we would have served that special population, then we do not have a special population.” In fact, he says, classroom instruction in resource rooms should look no different from instruction in the regular classroom. If it does, “we need to look at the regular classroom and try to understand what’s breaking down in terms of differentiation and individualized education approaches to the kids in that classroom.” It’s not just about teachers: Inclusive culture is an all-hands-on-deck operation. So, according to **Erin Studer**, “It’s really good if you can communicate every single person’s part in inclusion. What do your video staff people do? What do your maintenance people do? How does everybody know that they’re part of this mission?”





## Creating an Inclusive Culture

Additionally, don't underestimate the importance of students' own empowerment. As stated by **LaKendra Butler**, "When I created Strive, I wanted kids to be able to advocate for themselves and ask the hard questions of teachers, respectfully of course. That's what I believe we're doing with students, for them to be able to self-advocate beyond me being in their lives. For students who have disabilities, this is one of the most basic skills."

Words themselves both reflect and shape culture, as **Sam Drazin** pointed out: "I wish disability didn't have a negative connotation in our society, but you can try to fight that connotation by changing language to make it more positive and universal . . . We all have disabilities and we all have strengths. We could call our challenges some sort of disability, or things we're trying to get better at." **Tommy Reddick** concurred: "We wouldn't let any teachers say 'those aren't my kids.' That would be a hard talk if we ever heard any language like that."

**Toni Barton** sees the power of words in another way, saying that "storytelling" helps prospective leaders understand what it means to put students at the center. About her work with emerging leaders at Relay, she said "I need you to think about who your student is. Who is the student that needs you to completely redesign whatever is not working for them so that you can disrupt the status quo for that student." She also shows prospective leaders data from the NAEP about how students with disabilities continue to struggle, asking them to connect the data to their experiences at their schools. Toni refers to this process as "experiential empathy," because, once the experience is made personal for school leaders, they are eager to go out and do the hard things (i.e., foster high expectations for all students).

While every strong school tries to create a robust web of connections between the teachers, students, and families, doing so is especially important for students with disabilities. **Cristina de Jesus** discussed her approach when working with students with disabilities and shared that she "always tried to go the extra mile for every student and really tried to tune into what their needs were—and do a lot of outreach with families." She believed that doing this is what brought her positive feedback from families and, in turn, inspired her to try and determine the right model for educating all students.





Erin Larkin-Maguire,  
Relay Graduate School of  
Education, New York, NY

Finally, school leaders must amplify the voices of students with disabilities and their families in their planning processes. Whether through town halls, surveys, parent-school conferences, or other means, leaders need to ensure that the families of students with disabilities feel seen and heard. **Erin Larkin-Maguire** pointed out that leaders often have no idea who the kids are that come to their schools.

Her advice is to:

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*Start with a learning agenda centered around getting to know the humans who are in your care, learn about who your teachers are, and do not make any assumptions about who your teachers, kids, or families are. Figure out all the strengths you have at your disposal, and make that the thing that you are mining for.*

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# A To-Do List

*The Beacons provided advice regarding the specific steps leaders should take to realize inclusivity in action and excel in educating students with disabilities. The first batch of advice concentrates on “getting the right people on the bus”, while the second addresses systemic issues.*





Ben Marcovitz, Former Chief Executive Officer, Collegiate Academies, New Orleans, LA

## Hiring and Orientation

Putting together a solid, well-prepared team is critical; yet, several Beacons voiced concerns that segregated special education classrooms are often being led by novices or those without any depth in their preparation. **Toni Barton** put it bluntly: "Segregated classrooms exist because we don't think the 'regular' classroom teacher can provide certain students with what they need or that those students can be better served somewhere else. If this is true, then why don't those classrooms have the best resources or the best teachers? We know that a large percentage of students in those spaces are not getting what they need or deserve, yet we continue to maintain the status quo. It is time for this to end."

For **Emma Mac**, the key is hiring special education teachers who have high expectations. She knows that, if they "don't necessarily have high expectations for our kids, they are not going to be a great fit."

**Ben Marcovitz** recognizes that the major gap in high school performance is "belief"; so, he built a hiring process around believers-

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*"We're not going to look for immediate skill sets as the number-one factor. Instead, we're going to put candidates in live scenarios with kids, have them talk through their toughest moment in the classroom, and have them recreate them successfully. Ask them what they'd do with a million dollars to change things for these kids and tell them their answers are what we'd expect from them here." So, applicants arrive at his campus and see "a group of people who they admire, who they look up to, who are having a fantastic time doing the hardest work."*

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## Hiring and Orientation

If talking about a true culture reset, you have to mean it and follow through—even if the going gets rough. In **Tommy Reddick's** school, “Teachers were used to a certain treatment if they showed up to work on time and turned in lesson plans on time, but, if they weren’t producing data with our kids, there needed to be a hard talk and, sometimes, an eventual exit. Some teachers who were the favorites on [the] staff had to go. Even one of our board members resigned and left. So, we lost a couple of great teachers, but that culture reset was really strong and let everybody know we're here for the growth of our students first.”

**Sam Drazin's** nonprofit, Changing Perspectives, developed a curriculum to foster collective responsibility through an empathy training program. This is how he describes it:

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“I use an image of a house, and, below the house, I put the word ‘awareness’, and, on the roof of the house, I put ‘empathy’. The idea is that if we want to create inclusive school communities, we need to ensure that school leaders and teachers, as well as other students, are able to empathize and understand the perspective of another person.” He explained “folks sometimes try to jump in and jump to the change, but, if you do that, you’re combating ignorance, misunderstandings, biases, and stereotypes. However, if you start with building awareness, and move to empathy, you have the time to address misconceptions, biases, and stereotypes so that you can effectively get to the perspective piece, and you will have already shifted something.”

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Sam Drazin, Founder & Executive Director  
of Changing Perspectives, Bradford, VT



Marco Petruzzi, Former CEO, Green Dot Public Schools Los Angeles, CA

## Systems and Structures

When a school is mission-driven and firing on all cylinders, its power to encourage innovative thinking is multiplied, as noted in a comment by **Erin Studer**: “I always tell people I’m not smart enough or brave enough to have invented inclusion. I just happen to have the good fortune to find my way to a school that operates that way.” The following is a brief snapshot of some programmatic points on which the Beacons recommend focusing.

### Take responsibility.

A common problem is the leader who treats special education as an island unto itself, treating “inclusion” a solely the job of the special educator.

**Lindsay Kruse** pushes back against this: “What a sped coordinator can’t do, what actually makes their life hell, is if you cannot set the mindset and the culture of the building and say ‘this is what we do.’ Then they’re fighting an uphill battle.”

### Identify your model.

After becoming CEO, **Marco Petruzzi** realized there were huge differences in the special education programming among the several Green Dot schools. So, he asked a straightforward question: “What’s our model?” Prior to that moment, his “default answer” was that “a small independent high school cannot possibly have all the disciplines in special ed that are necessary to cover all kinds of student classifications.” So, Green Dot hired top-notch special education professionals; standardized IEP forms across campuses; developed new data systems; and deployed the resources of a 10-school network to provide coaching and support peer collaboration.

### Do your homework.

**Brooke Allen** noted that: “A lot of school leaders are super adept at supporting a general education teacher or at least hooking them up with the right resources or the instructional coach that they need, but, if they have a great special ed teacher who’s managing so much, they’ll just say ‘that’s great! You do that and I’ll cheer you on!’ But that special ed teacher can feel super isolated and unsupported.”



# Systems and Structures

## Look at Compensation.

**Sam Drazin** thinks paraprofessional educators are “extremely undervalued individuals” in school systems. “Oftentimes, the paraeducators making \$8.50 an hour are the ones working the closest on a daily basis with our most intense students. It’s so counterintuitive—the people with the least amount of education, whom we’re paying the least amount of money, are actually teaching our highest-needs students.”

## Use Charter Flexibility.

Charter schools enjoy flexibility in deploying their own resources, and **Shannon Hodge** shows why it should be put to good use: “Every year, I went to my board with a budget including rough estimates for staffing, and we’ve never actually gotten those numbers right. They understood that I had a bucket of money for staff, and I would use that money however I needed to regardless of what the budget actually said. We didn’t have to wait four months to get the board to think about approving something to create a program for students who are struggling. We could do it overnight if we needed to.”

## Encourage mentoring.

Several Beacons advised pairing an aspiring leader with an inspiring mentor to illustrate how high expectations are realized. “My third year of teaching was definitely one of the most impactful of any of my career experiences”, said **Erin Larkin-Maguire**. “I became a co-teacher, with Jackie Barnes, who was in her 25th year of teaching. She was a living embodiment of continuous improvement. We had an amazing year, because nobody came with hubris; everybody came with a desire to lift up the kids. I didn’t know what high expectations were until I saw her teaching. She would just move through the curriculum, and I remember being stunned that the kids could go that fast.” Because I had only been seeing a single cohort of kids all day every day for the first two years, I had made the assumption that they couldn’t do it. That experience showed me that low expectations are the enemy of highly effective special education. Our kids outperformed every other third-grade class on the state tests that year.”

Shannon Hodge, Founding Executive Director of the DC Charter School Alliance; Co-Founder and Executive Director of Kingsman Academy Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.





# Systems and Structures

## Reconsider the schedule.

**Emma Mac:** “I previously approached things like scheduling in the usual way: the majority of our students first and then we’ll figure out how to fit special education students into that model. We needed to flip that on its head. We needed to think about how to restructure our school to support our most vulnerable learners and then build a general education model to support that.” She added that the leader’s own time is a critical resource: “Make sure you are spending time in your special education classroom on your daily or weekly rotation of observations—not so much to give feedback [but] to listen, see what the teachers are doing, and [see] what they need.”

## Make sure staff know what they’ve accomplished.

Teachers are compensated not only by their salary but also by satisfaction they get in altering a child’s life trajectory for the better. While every competent school leader knows that positive reinforcement helps keep teachers motivated, it is even more important in special education, where teachers can be snowed under by the complexities of their work.

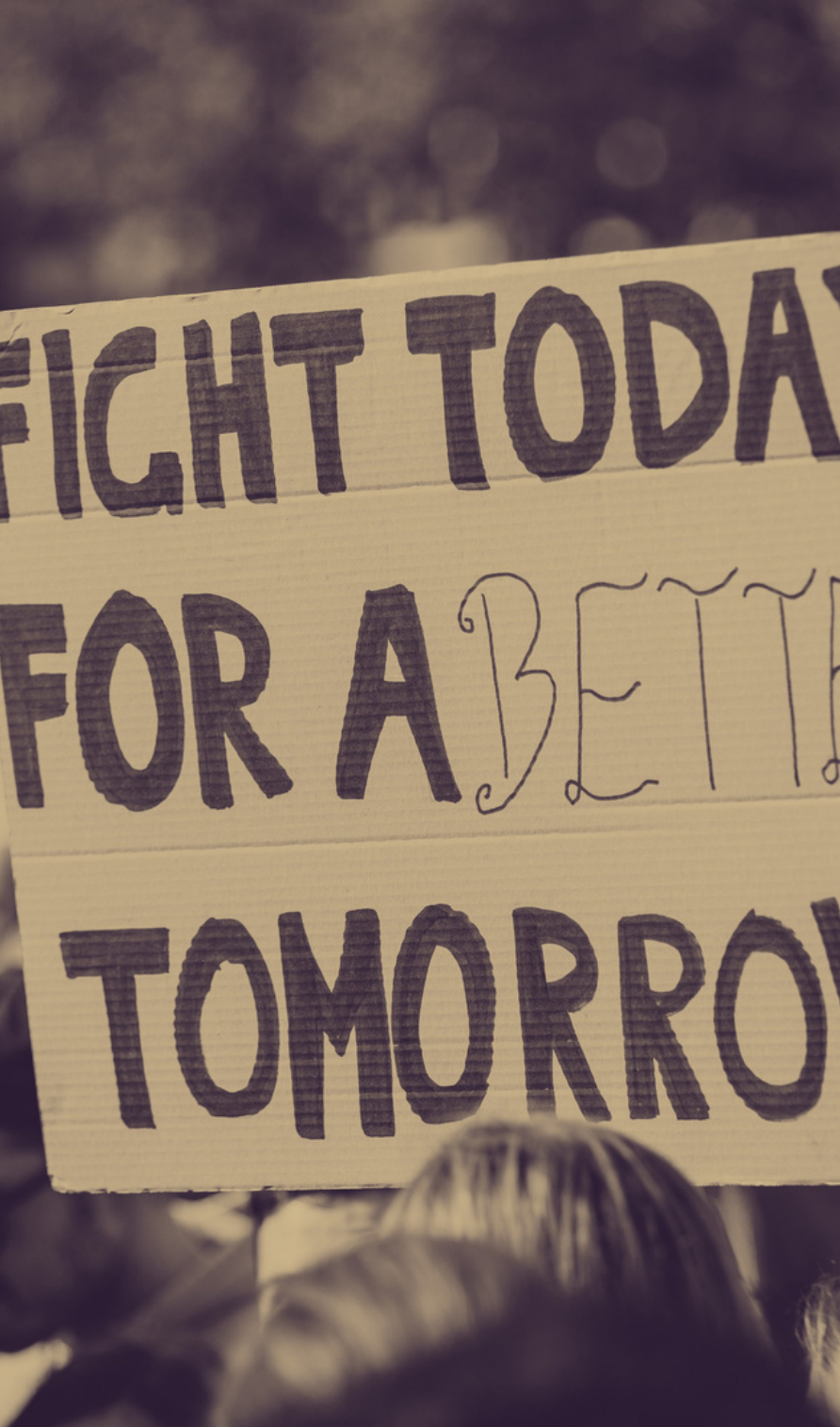
**Julie Fisher** spoke of an approach she takes:

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“I always make a point of sharing triumphs with teachers. If a teacher worked with a student years ago who ultimately went on to graduate, and then I learn more about their subsequent successes and where they are now, I always try to let that teacher know, saying ‘you were a part of this, and I want you to see what can happen if you put a child in the right environment with the right supports.’ Showing them what the end result can be for these kids is really important.”

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Julie Fisher, Executive Director, NYC  
Autism Charter School, New York, NY



# Recommendations & Key Takeaways

Through our Beacon interviews, we were able to identify recommendations and next steps for cultivating leaders with a strong commitment to serving students with disabilities, including the following:

- Reshape leader preparation to include more hands-on experience with students with disabilities. Learn first-hand what works and what does not.
- Provide mentoring by leaders who are succeeding in this work. Ensure novice teachers are put in classrooms where they see effective, high-quality teaching being executed.
- Take advocacy seriously: as an essential part of the job for both leaders and staff.
- Design for the margins. Designing systems that work for students with disabilities serves all students well.
- Budget appropriately to include all aspects of special education, including equitable compensation for key staff and ongoing professional development opportunities.
- Create a culture that authentically values inclusion and high expectations for all students.
- In hiring, set the bar high, creating positive peer pressure that motivates the entire staff to reach ambitious goals.
- Review systems and practices regularly to identify areas for improvement and strengths.
- Provide staff with positive reinforcement.
- Take risks. Do not be afraid to think outside the box on students' behalf.
- Be a warm agitator. Disrupt the status quo, and do it well.



# Afterword

We've learned a great deal from the conversations with our Beacons and have already partnered with three charter school leader pipelines programs to develop and integrate content that reflects the Beacons' views and helps replicate their commitment to students with disabilities in emerging leaders.

We take these next steps while mindful there is still a steep hill to climb. We do strongly recommend that all school leaders participate in a leadership pipeline program, but we want every such program to include a sharp focus on educating students with disabilities. It should operate just as recommended here: not as an add-on or afterthought but as the central responsibility of every leader and a foundational aspect of creating a school that serves all students well.

These conversations illustrate another point: It's essential that leaders have a network of peers who can inform and support each other. Toward that end, once our developmental collaboration is completed, we will be hosting an invitational convening of the Beacons and representatives of major leadership pipelines. We cannot predict what plan will emerge but expect that a gathering of all these accomplished people cannot help but galvanize us toward ongoing action.

Stay tuned for further news, but, for now, please use this report to start conversations in your own school and community. We stand ready to support your efforts.

Lauren Morando Rhim  
Executive Director and Co-Founder  
The Center for Learner Equity





# The Center for Learner Equity