SRI International

SPECIAL EDUCATION ELEMENTARY LONGITUDINAL STUDY (SEELS)

What do Stakeholders Want and Need to Know?

Table of Contents

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDY (SEELS)

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education has commissioned a design for the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), to be developed by SRI International, with support from the Research Triangle Institute.

As part of a comprehensive OSEP program of longitudinal research, SEELS will involve a large, nationally representative sample of students in special education who are ages 8 through 12 when the sample is selected (Fall 1999). Students will be selected randomly from rosters of students in special education; rosters will be provided by local education agencies (and special schools) that are selected for and agree to participate in the study. Statistical summaries generated from SEELS will generalize to special education students nationally as a group, to each of the 13 federal special education disability categories, and to each single-year age cohort. Information about students will be collected repeatedly as they transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. Thus, SEELS will provide the first national picture of the experiences and outcomes of students in special education as they move through these crucial years of their educational careers.

Task Force Purpose

To enable SEELS to be maximally useful to the wide range of audiences that will be interested in it, OSEP is relying on the collective expertise of a task force whose members represent many of those audiences: parents; teachers, principals, and related service practitioners; researchers; local, state, and federal policy makers; and advocacy organizations. The task force is being asked to identify the range of information needs that could potentially be met by SEELS, translate those information needs into research questions, and help to envision a conceptual framework to guide the study in addressing those questions. Because the range of information needs the task force may articulate is likely to exceed the capacity of any single study to meet them, the task force also is being asked to suggest priorities among research questions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide background information to assist the task force in identifying the critical research questions that SEELS must address in order to be successful and in developing a conceptual framework that encompasses those research questions. The paper begins with an overview of the SEELS design process and current plans for the SEELS sample, timeline, and instrumentation. The remainder of the document is devoted to the SEELS conceptual framework and is intended to stimulate discussion about the relative importance of different conceptual issues, key study questions, and likely interrelationships among factors.

The SEELS Design Process

The design process will include developing the SEELS timeline, sample specifications, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis plans, as well as recruiting a sample of local

education agencies (LEAs) and special schools from which students will be selected for the sample. The table below documents key study design activities and their associated completion dates.

Table 1 SEELS DESIGN ACTIVITIES AND SCHEDULE	
Solicit input from research advisory panel	10/23 and following
Convene task force	11/23/98
Task force meeting summary	11/27/98
Draft project time line and data collection plan	12/24/98
Draft project sampling plan	12/24/98
Draft project data analysis plan	12/24/98
Final project time line and data collection plan	1/25/99
Final project sampling plan	1/25/99
Final project data analysis plan	1/25/99
Instrument analysis	2/8/99
First interim sampling report	2/24/99
Second interim sampling report	3/24/99
Conceptual outlines and item specifications for new instruments	3/24/99
Final sampling report	6/24/99
Drafts of instruments	5/7/99
Revise and pilot test instruments	6/24/99
Report of pilot test	7/8/99
Final sampling fractions	7/26/99
Final instruments and OMB clearance forms	8/24/99

SEELS Design Overview

Sample

The SEELS student sample, to be selected in the Fall of 1999, will be a nationally representative sample that will generalize to: students in special education ages 8 to 12 nationally as a group as they age, each of the five single-year age cohorts within the full sample, and students in each of the 13 federally defined special education disability categories in the full sample. Additional characteristics of the sample include the following:

- In order to generate statistical summaries with adequate precision in the study's out years SEELS will require a sample of approximately 1,300 students in each of the 13 federal special education disability categories (with the exception of deaf/blind) at the time of the last data collection. Assuming that is the 2003-2004 school year (although the duration of the study has not yet been fully determined), the total sample is estimated to be approximately 15,800 students at the outset (the 1999-2000 school year).

- To generate the needed student sample, SEELS will need to select students from between 400 and 450 LEAs. These LEAs are likely to be selected via a stratified sampling strategy to ensure representation of region, district size, and student poverty. The primary LEA sample could be augmented by a sample of students from special schools. The LEA sample will be drawn in January 1999.

- Students will be randomly selected from district rosters according to specified sampling fractions for each age group and disability category. SEELS students will attend a large and diverse group of schools, estimated to number more than 2,000.

The sheer size and wide geographic distribution of the student sample has important implications for the kinds and frequency of data collection that can be afforded. The wide range in age and disability characteristics of students also pose significant challenges in ensuring that measures and instrumentation are appropriate to that student diversity.

Timeline

The specific data collection schedule for SEELS is still under discussion. However, it is certain that SEELS will be longitudinal in nature so that it can track changes in student statuses and outcomes. There are three general options available in sequencing the main data collection activities:

- **Fixed waves of data collection** – Fixed-time data collection involves collecting information on all sample members at specified calendar periods, regardless of the age or educational stage of the youth. For example, data could be collected during the spring of years 1, 3, and 5; or in the fall and spring of selected years, etc.

- **Data collection tied to specified milestones in a student's experience** – This approach calls for information to be collected about sample members when they experience specified events (e.g., at a transition from elementary to middle school, at a particular birthday). This approach has the advantage of illuminating key ages or milestones by collecting data on each child at that key point, regardless of when in the course of the study that point occurs.

- **A combination of the two approaches** – It is also possible to combine these approaches so that, for example, information is collected from all students at two or more specified time periods (e.g., in the first school year of the study and again in the last school year of the study), with intermediate data collection focusing on specified milestone events (e.g., the transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school). This would permit a wide-ranging description of the full sample at two or more time points (yielding trend data) as well as permitting an in-depth look at the milestone events of interest for all students who experience them in the course of the study.

Decisions regarding the study timeline depend in part on the specification of study's conceptual framework and it's associated research questions. So, recommendations of the task force regarding research questions will influence those design decisions. It is currently anticipated that the first SEELS data collection efforts will take place in the spring of 2000.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

SEELS is intended to be far-reaching in terms of conceptual domains that it will address. Thus, SEELS will collect data from multiple data sources (e.g., parents, teachers, principals) using several data collection methods (e.g., telephone interviews, collection or abstraction of school records, mail surveys, teacher assessments or reports of student performance, direct assessments). As the task force considers the SEELS research agenda, it is important to consider the validity and logistics of obtaining data from different sources and in different ways. Table 2 illustrates potential information sources for different conceptual domains. Table 3 indicates design-related questions to be considered by the task force.

Table 2 POSSIBLE DATA SOURCES							
Conceptual Domains	Parent	Student	Special Education Teacher	General Education Teacher	Principal	Student records	Extant Sources
National context							X
State context							X
Community characteristics					X		X
LEA characteristics					X		X
School characteristics	O	O	O	O	X		O
School programs			X	X			
Non-school factors	X	O					
Household characteristics	X						
Student characteristics/ experiences	X	X	X	X			
Student performance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

X   Possible primary respondent for items relating to domain.
O   Possible secondary respondent, providing some data relating to domain.

Table 3 POTENTIAL DESIGN-RELATED RESEARCH QUESTIONS
• What are the ages/grade levels that should be included in SEELS to best meet information needs? How long should SEELS follow students?
• Are there key milestones or stages in students' experiences that should be a focus of data collection?
• Are the experiences of students in special (state-supported) schools of particular interest so that the study should supplement the student sample explicitly with students who attend such schools?
• Is it important to collect data directly from students?
• After considering all components of the current framework, is there something missing that we need to learn about students in special education that it does not encompass?
•

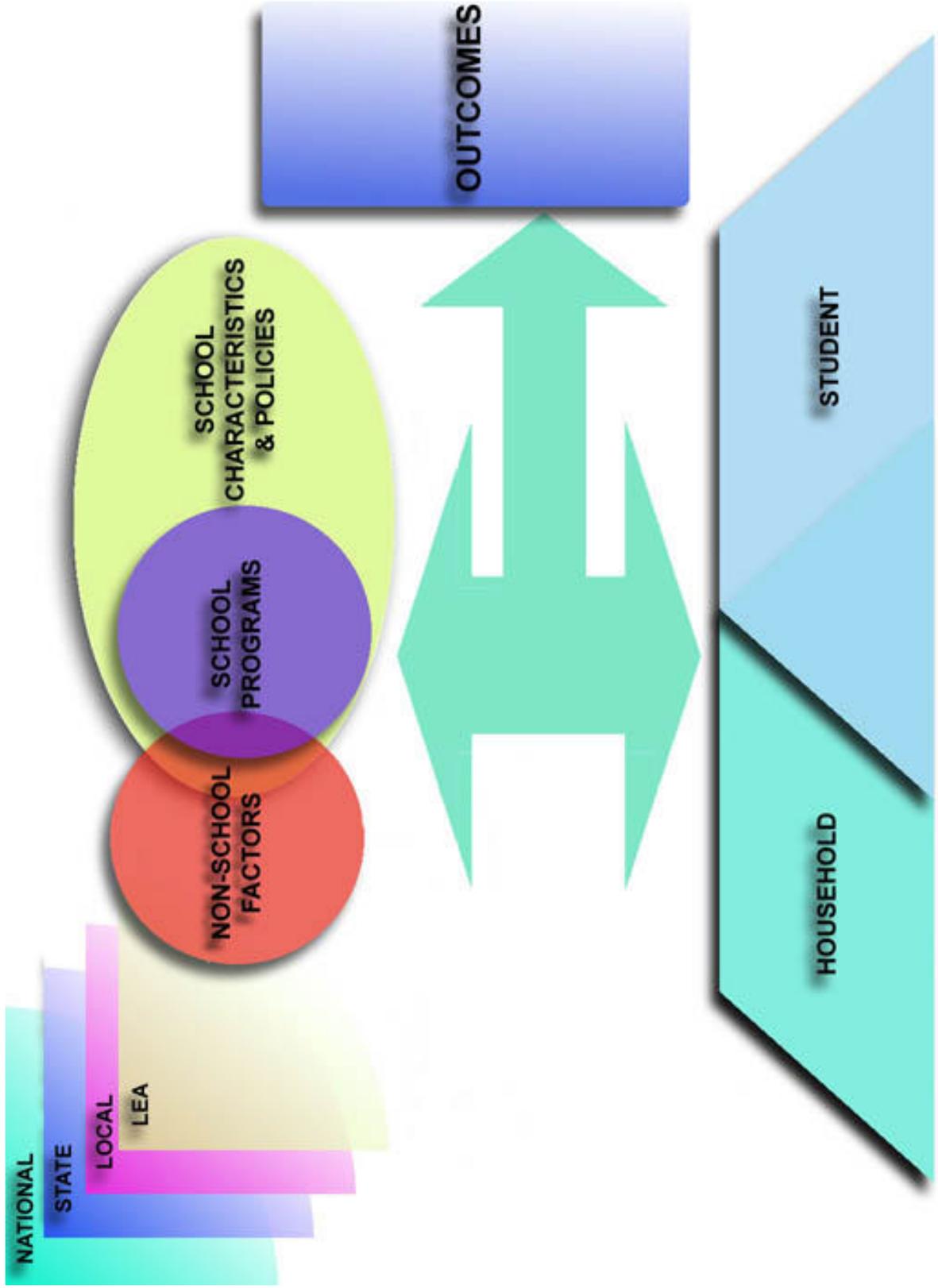**Organizing What We Want to Know: The SEELS Conceptual Framework**

As mentioned earlier, the task force is asked to identify research questions that will be the focus of the study and to help develop a conceptual framework that encompasses those questions. To support these activities, we have developed a preliminary conceptual framework (Exhibit 1) that can serve as a starting point in organizing the group's discussion of what we want to learn from SEELS. The framework identifies several domains within which various audiences may have specific issues, questions, or information needs.

The framework demonstrates the prominence of student outcomes as a focus of study. It suggests that outcomes are influenced by a multitude of factors, including the student's school program and the school characteristics and policies that help determine that program. Because a child is much more than a student, the framework also gives prominent place to the influence of non-school factors (e.g., extracurricular activities, services) on student outcomes. The framework further suggests that both student outcomes and school and non-school factors are influenced by characteristics of the student and his or her household; i.e., what students get and how they do is in part a function of who they are and the households from which they come. These are the primary components of the framework—those that characterize the direct experience of students.

The framework also illustrates the fact that the individual experiences of children occur in the context of the district, community, state, and country in which they live. These are secondary aspects of the framework in that they less directly influence individual student experiences and outcomes. Many of these contextual factors will not be measured directly in the study, but will help in interpreting SEELS findings.

To structure our discussion of research questions, we will address each of the primary components of the framework in turn. In the following pages, we provide background on these components, working backward from an initial focus on student outcomes. In our discussion, we must weigh the following points:

- **Key Issues**. What are the key issues in research, policy, and practice for each substantive area? Are there issues that do not appear to have a place in the conceptual framework? What relationships between domains do we expect or need to study?

- **Research Questions**. Descriptive, comparative, and explanatory research questions pertaining to each study domain need be identified.

- **Indicators.** Are there specific indicators of interest related to some research questions? For example, if knowing students' academic performance is of interest, is academic performance best indicated by grades students receive, test scores, teacher assessments, or some other indicators?

OUTCOMES

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS & POLICIES

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

NON-SCHOOL FACTORS

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

LEA

STUDENT

HOUSEHOLD

Exhibit 1 PRELIMINARY SEELS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

6

Information Source. Information from a single SEELS research domain could potentially be collected from a range of sources. What sources of information are most credible for particular questions? What level of credibility is acceptable, weighing cost and logistical factors?

- **Priorities**. Within each domain of the conceptual framework, numerous interesting topics and subtopics can be identified. Given the limits on study resources, we must assign some research topics higher priority than others. What are the questions that SEELS simply must answer for the investment in it to be considered worthwhile?

Each of the components of the framework is discussed below.
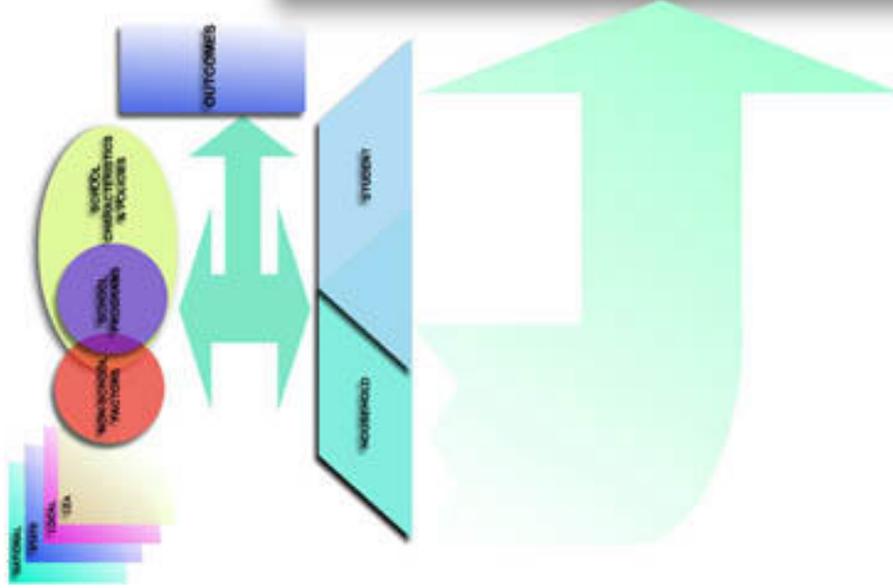
OUTCOMES (NCO)

- Presence & Participation
- Accommodation & Adaptation
- Physical Health
- Responsibility & Independence
- Contribution & Citizenship
- Academic & Functional Literacy
- Personal & Social Adjustment
- Satisfaction

Exhibit 2 - FRAMEWORK DETAIL - OUTCOMES

8

Student Outcomes

Improvement of student outcomes is the primary objective of the educational system generally, and special education specifically. We expect much of our schools. We anticipate not only world class academic performance, but we also expect students to be good citizens, team players, and leaders. SEELS will look at student outcomes longitudinally, potentially in terms of academics, social, physical, vocational, and other aspects of development. The National Center on Educational Outcomes has conducted a comprehensive series of Delphi activities to identify outcomes and indicators that apply across the age range. Although the design of SEELS need not consider only or all of the NCEO identified outcomes; they provide a useful starting point. The NCEO outcome domains are described below.

Two outcome domains are considered by NCEO as precursors and contributors to other, later outcomes. These are:

- Presence and participation – Student attends school, and participates in activities.

- Accommodation and adaptation – Student uses enrichments, adaptations, accommodations, or compensations to achieve outcomes.

In the SEELS draft conceptual framework, these domains are included in the components related to the student's school program and non school factors and are discussed in subsequent sections as part of those components.

NCEO outcome domains considered in the SEELS outcome component could include the following:

- Academic and functional literacy – Student demonstrates competence in communication, problem solving, mathematics, reading, writing, and can use technology.

- Contribution and citizenship – Student complies with school and community rules and volunteers.

- Responsibility and independence – Student demonstrates age-appropriate independence, is responsible, and can navigate her/his environment.

- Personal and social adjustment – Student copes with personal challenges, has positive self image, respects cultural and individual differences, and gets along with others.

- Physical health – Student makes healthy lifestyle choices, is aware of safety, fitness and health care needs, and is physically fit.

- Satisfaction – Student, family, and community are satisfied with the education the student is receiving.

The task force should provide guidance on which of these outcome domains are of interest in SEELS and which are of most importance. Potential research questions relating to student outcomes appears in Table 4.

Table 4
POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS – STUDENT OUTCOMES

Descriptive Questions

- How well do students in special education read and do mathematics?

- How well do students in special education communicate? Use technology?

- What grades do students in special education get?

- How able are students in special education to solve academic problems?

- What is the pattern of school attendance of students in special education?

- What is the classroom behavior of students in special education? To what extent are they suspended or expelled from school?

- To what extent do students in special education have and see friends?

- How independent are students in special education in self-care, mobility, personal and financial management?

- Are older students in special education working? Getting a driver's license?

- To what extent do students in special education participate in adolescent risk behaviors, including smoking, drinking, sexual activity, or drug use?

- How well do students in special education maintain a positive self-concept and handle difficulties and frustrations?

- To what extent do students in special education have interests or hobbies? Volunteer or do community service?

- How satisfied are parents of students in special education with their children's schools and school programs? How satisfied are students?

-

Comparative and Explanatory Questions

- How do outcomes compare to those of students in general education?

- How do outcomes vary among disability categories and for students who differ in demographic and household characteristics; to what extent do some students do better than others?

- How do outcomes in different domains correlate with one another? E.g., do students with classroom behavior problems have academic problems as well?

- How do outcomes change over time? E.g., what growth in academic ability do students experience in a school year? From year to year?

- What changes in outcomes we do see when students transition from elementary to middle school and middle to high school?

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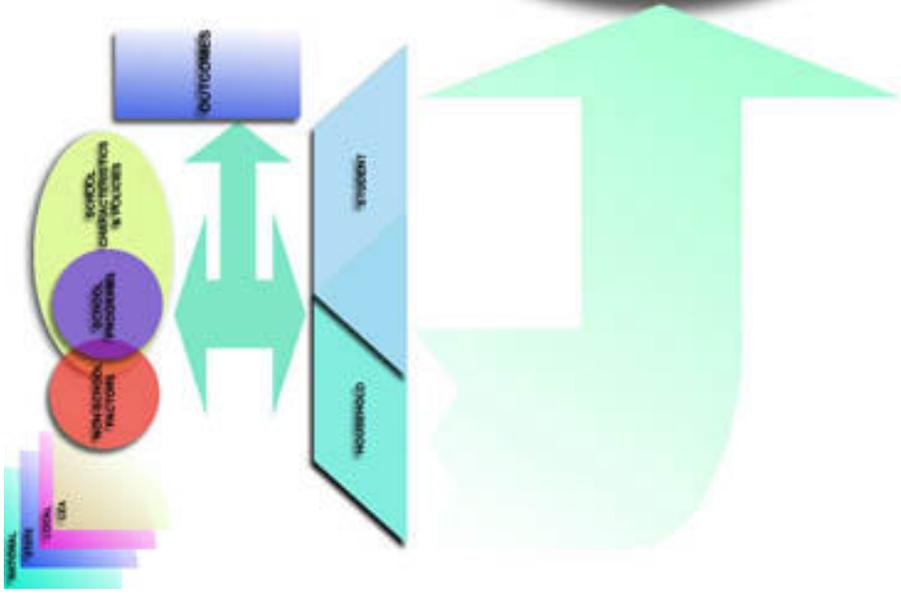
SCHOOL PROGRAMS

- Curriculum
- Instructional Personnel
- Collaboration/Consultation
- Use of Time
- Instructional Practices
- Accommodations
- Placement
- Related Services

Exhibit 3 - FRAMEWORK DETAIL - SCHOOL PROGRAMS

School Programs

It is through the school programs provided to students that the educational system has the greatest opportunity to support positive student outcomes. School programs also present the greatest opportunity for change and improvement as effective educational structures, methods, and approaches are discovered. Because they contribute much to the quality of students' educational experiences and the outcomes they achieve, SEELS will need to identify in some detail the scope of the school programs offered to students, both in the classroom and in the larger context of the total school day. Some possible factors to be included in SEELS are:

- Classroom configuration – Classrooms differ in the number of students they serve, whether single or multiple ages or grades are included, whether they are taught by a single teacher or a team of teachers, and other factors.

- Placement – Special education occurs in a variety of contexts. The characteristics and frequency of the range of instructional placements, including general education, pull out classes, self contained classes, special purpose day schools, and residential schools can be expected to influence students' educational experiences and results.

- Curriculum – The curriculum provides the framework for instructional content, including the subject matter, sequence, and difficulty. Students in special education are exposed to a range of curricula, from those that are identical to general education to highly individualized curricula that reflect individual learning goals.

- Instructional practices – Students in special education experience a wide variety of instructional practices that may influence their educational progress, including inquiry learning, direct instruction, cognitive strategy training, cooperative learning, community based instruction, precision teaching, peer mediated instruction, and small group or individual instruction.

- Accommodations – There is increasing acknowledgment that students in special education are more likely to achieve positive outcomes when appropriate accommodations in instruction and/or assessment are provided. SEELS could ascertain the use of assignment/assessment adjustments (e.g. time to complete tests), adapted instructional or testing materials, tutors, readers, assistive technologies, etc.

- Related services – Access to related services can be an essential component of a program designed to meet individual student needs. SEELS could describe the type and frequency used under each of the mandated IDEA categories.

- Use of time – Time is a finite quantity in schools. Many worthy efforts compete with each other for time to conduct the activities that will lead to their goals. SEELS could describe the allocation of time in the school day of students in special education.

- Teaching and related service personnel - A range of instructional staff touch the lives of students in special education. It could be important to understand the types of teaching and service personnel who work with students in special education, including for example:

  ➢ Primary role (e.g., general education teacher, special education teacher, related service provider).

  ➢ Educational background and experience (e.g., degrees, certification, years of experience).

  ➢ Extent of collaboration and consultation.

Potential research questions related to educational programs appear in Table 5.

Table 5
POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS – SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Descriptive Questions

- In what ways are students in special education present and participating in their schools? To what extent are they present in their neighborhood schools and in regular education classrooms?

- What are the characteristics of the classrooms in which students in special education are instructed? E.g., how many students and adults are there?

- What are the goals and expected outcomes specified for students in special education?

- To what kinds of curricula are students in special education exposed? To what degree are they participating in the general education curriculum? To what extent are community-based and vocational experiences included in the curriculum?

- What specific instructional approaches are used with students in special education? How is instructional time used?

- How is student progress evaluated? To what extent are students in special education who are in regular classrooms expected to work up to the performance standards of other students in the classroom?

- What accommodations do students in special education receive in instruction and evaluation?

- What related services do students in special education receive as part of their special education programs? What is the duration, intensity, and source of these services?

- What are the characteristics of instructional personnel who deliver services to students in special education?

- What preparation or support for the transition from elementary to middle and middle to high schools do students in special education receive?

- What is postsecondary transition planning like for students in special education, and when does it begin?

- How safe are children at school? To what extent have students with disabilities been victims of threatening or violent incidents at school (i.e., fights, stealing, bullying)?

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Comparative & Explanatory Questions

- How do school programs vary among disability categories and for students with different demographic and household characteristics?

- How do school programs and experiences of students in special education compare with those of the general student population?

- Are there aspects of school programs that are related to better outcomes? In which domains?

- How do school programs change over time? What are the program changes students experience in moving from elementary to middle and middle to high school?

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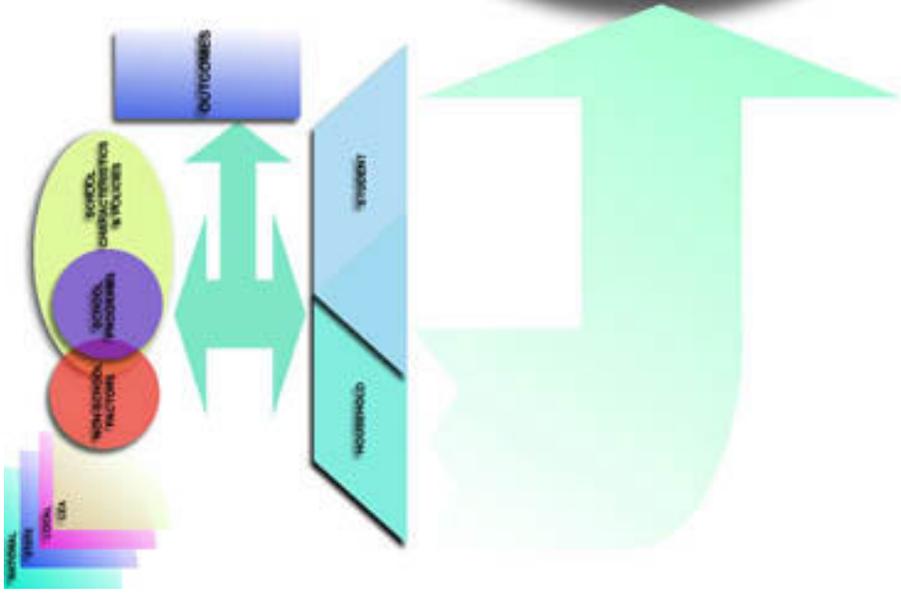
SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS & POLICIES

- Size
- Type
- Access to Resources
- Student Diversity
- Leadership
- Mission
- Climate
- Prereferral Strategies
- IEP Development
- Schoolwide Reforms

Exhibit 4 FRAMEWORK DETAIL - SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS/POLICIES

School Characteristics

The characteristics of schools can affect the quality of the education they provide. SEELS could capture many dimensions of schools as part of creating a comprehensive picture of the experiences of students in special education. Possible factors for task force consideration include:

- Size – A school's size has much to do with the logistics of its operation and its ability to change.

- Type – Schools of all types serve students in special education. Some types of schools are oriented toward the grade levels they serve (e.g., elementary, middle, and high schools, whereas others are created with specific purposes regarding their student population or educational approach (e.g. special schools, alternative schools, charter schools).

- Diversity of student population – Schools are serving increasingly diverse student populations. This diversity has particular relevance for special education, with the long-term debate regarding the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

- Access to resources – American education has changed dramatically since the days where teachers, textbooks, and students were the primary players in the educational process. Today, many schools make use of technological (e.g. instructional support, Internet access) and/or service delivery innovations (e.g. integrated health services) to improve outcomes.

- Leadership – Research has indicated the link between successful schools and effective leaders.

- Mission – A decade of school reform activities has suggested that schools, like other organizations, function better when the schools' mission is clearly articulated for both internal and external audiences.

- Climate – Many factors comprise a school's climate, some of which are believed to be linked to improved student results, such as strong connection between the school, the parents of its students, the broader community, and the professional development of its staff.

- Policies related to students in special education. A variety of policies impact the school experiences of students in special education, including those related to pre-referral strategies the referral process, IEP development, and discipline.

- School reforms – A number of educational reform efforts over the last decade often have been vague or silent with regard to their meaning in philosophy and practice for students in special education. SEELS could examine the presence of school-wide reforms and the degree to which schools consider and involve students in special education in them.

Potential research questions related to school characteristics appears in Table 6.
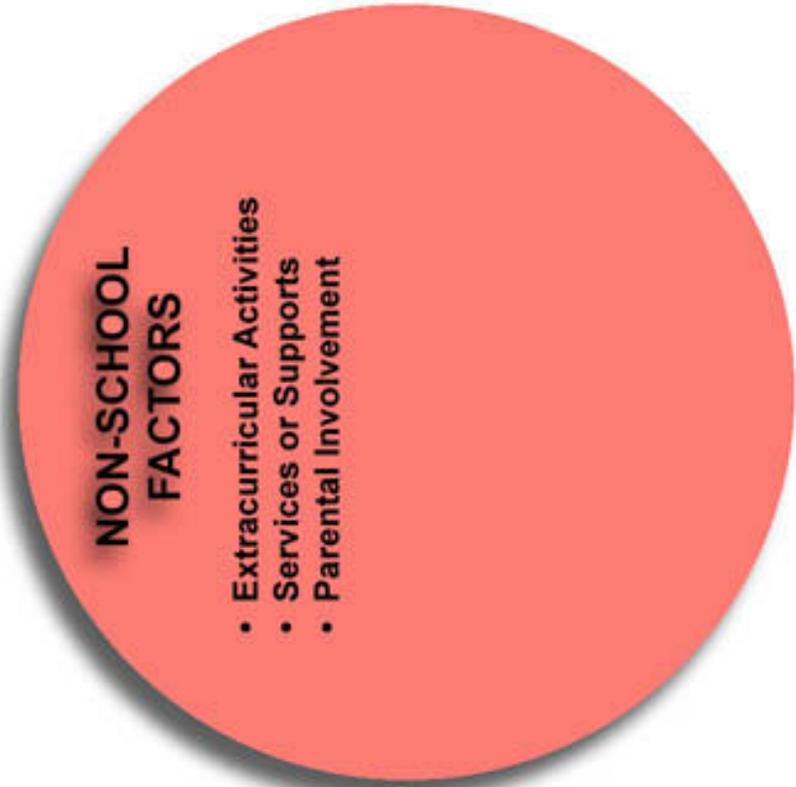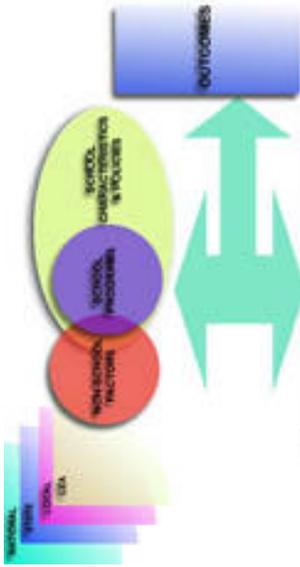
Table 6
POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS – SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

Descriptive Questions
- What types of schools serve students in special education?

- How large are schools that serve students in special education?

- What are the missions of schools that serve students in special education?

- What are the characteristics of the study body in schools attended by students in special education?

- What is the school climate and leadership like in schools attended by students in special

- What policies and practices related to special education are pursued by schools? E.g., to what extent are schools using pre-referral strategies? What referral processes do schools employ to determine eligibility for special education? What disciplinary policies are enforced?

- What placement and service options are available at the schools?

- How are IEPs developed and used?

- What school-wide reforms have schools implemented and how are students in special education included in them?

- What assessment programs are in place? Are students in special education included in school-wide assessments?

- What resources are available to and used by students in special education in the schools they attend?

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Comparative and Explanatory Questions
- How do school characteristics vary among disability categories and for students with different demographic and household characteristics?

- How do the schools attended by students in special education compare with those attended by the general student population?

- How do school characteristics and policies relate to variations in individual students' school programs?

- What school characteristics are associated with improved student outcomes?

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NON-SCHOOL FACTORS

- Extracurricular Activities
- Services or Supports
- Parental Involvement

Exhibit 5 FRAMEWORK DETAIL - NON-SCHOOL FACTORS

Non-school Factors

Because children are more than students and they learn in more settings than schools and classrooms, SEELS will examine the non-school factors and experiences in students lives. These might include the following:

- Extracurricular activities, including organized groups and individual enrichment experiences.

- Services or supports for the student, other than those included in his/her school program.

- Parental involvement – Considerable research has stressed the importance of the range, intensity, and ways in which parents are involved in the educational lives of their children, both for students and for schools.

A set of potential research questions related to non-school factors appears in Table 7.
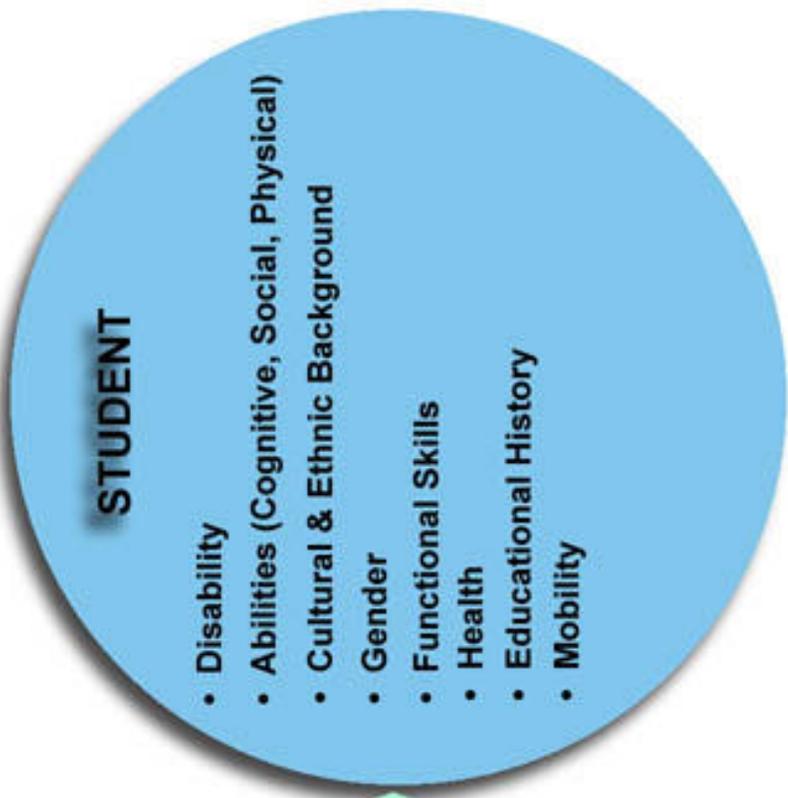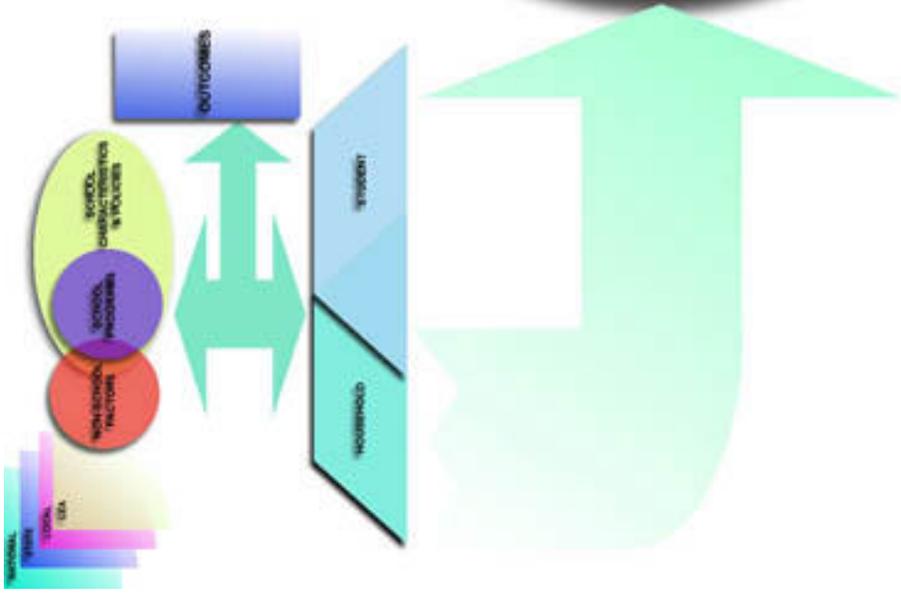
Table 7
POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS – NON-SCHOOL FACTORS

Descriptive Questions
- To what extent do students in special education participate in organized group activities at school? In the community?

- To what extent do extracurricular activities provide opportunities for inclusion with the general population of students (e.g., scouting) and other community members?

- To what extent do students with disabilities and/or their families participate in group activities for children of disabilities (e.g., Special Olympics) and their families (e.g., family support groups, accessing parent information and referral networks)?

- Are students with disabilities supervised after school? What are their after school care experiences and needs?

- What services and supports do families provide for their children outside of their school programs? E.g., do children have computers at home? Do families arrange for additional related services, beyond the special education program?

- To what extent do parents/guardians of students with disabilities participate in and interact with their children's schools?

- To what extent do parents/guardians of students with disabilities engage in activities at home that support the educational and social development of their children?

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Comparative and Explanatory Questions
- How do non-school factors vary among disability categories and for students with different demographic and household characteristics?

- How do non-school factors for students in special education compare with those of students in the general population?

- What non-school factors are associated with better outcomes?

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STUDENT

- Disability
- Abilities (Cognitive, Social, Physical)
- Cultural & Ethnic Background
- Gender
- Functional Skills
- Health
- Educational History
- Mobility

Exhibit 6   FRAMEWORK DETAIL - STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Individual Student Characteristics

Individual students are the core constituents of the educational process. Students bring powerful assets to the educational equation—intelligence, hope, enthusiasm, drive, compassion, sense of humor, and a variety of functional abilities—to varying degrees. To provide an understanding of student outcomes, SEELS will need to paint a thoughtful picture of students in special education. Several dimensions for task force consideration include:

- Disability – The disability category for which the student is eligible for special education is an important variable. There is, however, considerable variation in diagnosis and placement.

- Abilities – An assessment of students' functional capabilities in a range of domains from physical health to social development is an important element.

- Health – Students with disabilities of many kinds frequently face medical challenges that also present educational challenges in terms of school attendance and participation and demands on school staff.

- Ethnicity – Student ethnicity is both an important component of student identity and an ongoing policy issue in special education related to the appropriateness of assessment and placement.

- Mobility – Some students move repeatedly during their educational careers, posing challenges for their school performance and social involvement.

- Gender – Young women often have not fared as well as their male peers in terms of teacher attention and assessment or student outcomes. There is evidence that these outcome gaps are even wider among students in special education, particularly after their transition to adult life.

- Past experience – Students bring an educational history to each school year, including past experiences with grade promotion and retention.

Potential research questions related to student characteristics appear in Table 8.
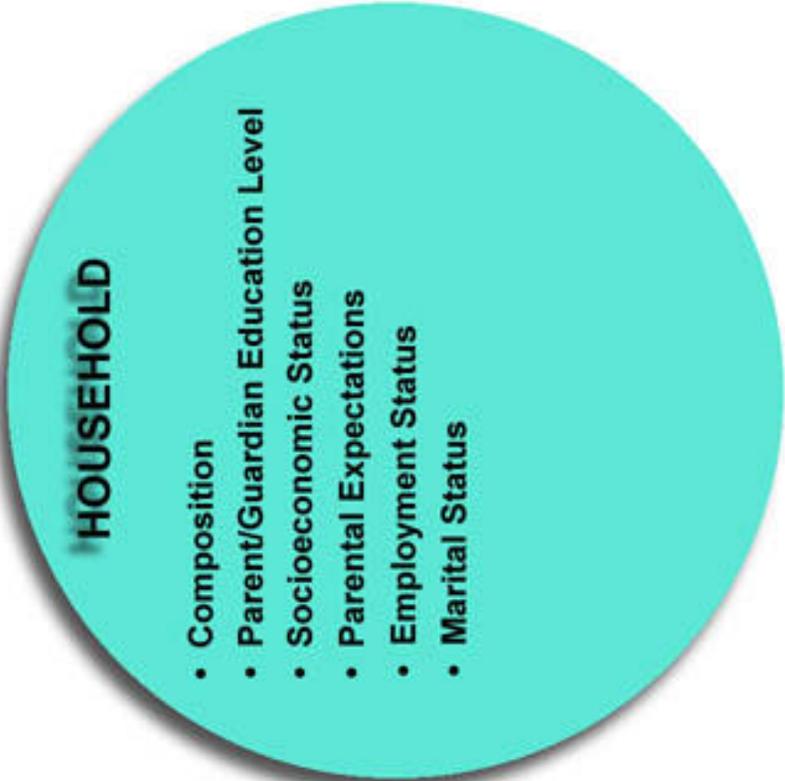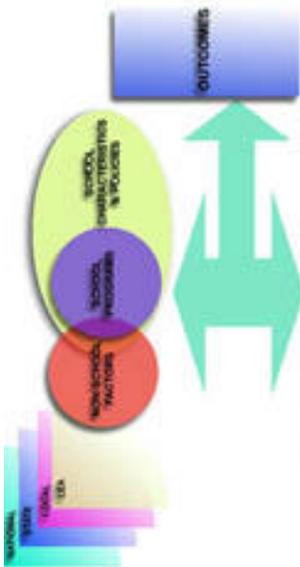
Table 8
POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS – STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Descriptive Questions
- What are students' identified disabilities?
- What are the implications of disability for student functioning? What are students' abilities in functional domains, including vision, hearing, use of limbs, practical reading and numeracy tasks?
- What are students' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and ethnicity?
- What languages do students speak? What is their English language proficiency?
- To what extent are students first generation immigrants?
- How generally healthy are students in special education? What are their experiences with hospitalization?
- Do students in special education have medical insurance? To what extent does it meet their medical needs?
- What past experiences with grade promotion or retention do students in special education have?
- Where and with whom do students live?
- How frequently have children moved? Changed schools?
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Comparative & Explanatory Questions
- How do demographic and health characteristics vary among disability categories?
- How do students in special education compare with the general student population in terms of these characteristics?
- How do student characteristics correlate with features of students' educational programs? To what extent is what they get a function of who they are?
- What individual characteristics correlate with better outcomes?
- How does past educational experience correlate with current academic performance?
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HOUSEHOLD

- Composition
- Parent/Guardian Education Level
- Socioeconomic Status
- Parental Expectations
- Employment Status
- Marital Status

Exhibit 7   FRAMEWORK DETAIL - HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

Students' Household Characteristics

Characteristics of a student's household influence many aspects of students' lives as well as being a place where much essential learning occurs. Considerable research has demonstrated the power of household, family, and parental characteristics to influence children's development. SEELS will need to describe the households of students with disabilities and link household characteristics to a range of student outcomes. Some characteristics for the task force's consideration include: composition (size, configuration, siblings or relatives with disabilities), socioeconomic status, education level, parental involvement in school/education, and parental expectations for the child's future (Table 9).

Table 9 POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS – HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS
Descriptive Questions • What is the composition of households in which students in special education live? • Do other family members of students in special education have disabilities? • What is the marital status of parents/guardians? • What is the educational background of parent(s)/guardian(s)? Their current educational activities? • What is the employment status of parent(s)/guardian(s)? • What is the household's socioeconomic status? Do they receive benefits from public assistance programs? • What is the household's experience with welfare reform? I.e., did they previously receive TANF benefits and now no longer receive them? Why? Did the student previously receive SSI benefits and now no longer receives them? Why? • What is the household's housing arrangement? How adequate is it? • What expectations do parents have for their children's future? • What is the impact on the household of having a child with a disability? (I.e., are family outcomes of interest, in addition to student outcomes?) • **Comparative & Explanatory Questions** • How do household characteristics vary among disability categories and for students with different demographic characteristics? • How do household characteristics change over time? • How do household characteristics correlate with features of students' school programs and non-school experiences? • What household characteristics correlate with better outcomes? • •

Contexts

Although SEELS will focus on student outcomes and the characteristics of students, households, and the school and non-school factors that relate to them, there are important contextual factors that frame the environment in which special education operates and that influence the effectiveness with which schools perform their work. Below we briefly describe the four contexts that influence the delivery of special education in the United States. Only LEA and community factors are likely to be measured directly; others will be tracked as they evolve through the study and will help shape interpretations of findings.

Local Education Agency (LEA) context—Historically, the process of education has been viewed as a local phenomenon. LEAs often share many of the characteristics of the communities they serve in terms of size, population, and resources. However, LEAs with similar population characteristics may be quite variable in the procedural, policy, and personnel issues that are decided at the LEA level, which may influence student experiences and outcomes. Examples of potentially important factors at the LEA level include: district enrollment, population characteristics, and geographic characteristics. District policies and resources also may importantly influence school programs as they play out at the school level (see preceding discussion of school characteristics).

Community context—The lives of children and families, the nature and functioning of schools, and the relationships between them are shaped by the nature of their surrounding communities, in all their diversity. The initial conceptual framework recognizes the interconnections between community and educational factors and student outcomes, including such community characteristics as size and density, population characteristics, community resources, and community well-being.

State context—State governments have considerable direct influence over the conditions under which schools operate. State population characteristics, history, policies, and regulations can affect the nature of the education that all students receive, including those with disabilities. In addition, states control much of the eligibility and regulatory framework specific to special education and students in special education. The conceptual framework may include some of the factors at the state level, including size, population characteristics, geographic characteristics and policies.

National context—The desire to improve the quality of the American educational system is center stage in the national policy arena. Standards, curricula, accountability, and school choice issues are among the topics of intense discussion and proposed reforms. This national focus on the quality of American education defines the environment in which states, communities, schools, teachers, and children engage in the education process. This context is comprised of a combination of legislation, policy debates, advocacy positions, and model programs and initiatives that together influence the direction or tone of activities at all levels of the education system. Because special education and regular education issues are more linked than in the past, SEELS will need to reflect an understanding of the dynamics in both arenas.