

Preparing Principals for Leadership in Special Education: Applying ISLLC Standards

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Educational leadership is ranked as the key variable associated with effective schools, but the principal of an effective school must be the leader for all programs within the school--including special education services. Over the next 5 years, districts may replace more than 60% of all principals. The result is that many schools will be led by inexperienced leaders without any legal or practical expertise when it comes to special education. This article examines the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards in relation to special education leadership and recommends an integrated preparation program.

Educational leadership is ranked as the number one key variable associated with effective schools, but the principal of an effective school must be the leader for all programs within the school--including special education services (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Support from principals has a “strong direct and indirect effects on virtually all critical aspects of teachers’ working conditions” (Gersten et al., p. 557). Principals, however, often feel unprepared for their roles in the administration of special programs (Goor & Schwenn, 1995). The leadership role of principals is crucial for improved education for students with disabilities, yet in recent years states have moved away from mandating preparation programs to include coursework on special education policy, procedures, laws, and practice.

Over the next 5 years, districts may replace more than 60% of all principals (Peterson, 2002). The result is that many schools will be led by inexperienced leaders without any legal or practical expertise when it comes to special education. Rhys (1996) mentioned that principals in her study were unaware that students not only must meet eligibility criteria for placement, but must also be in need of the service. Principals are overwhelmed by the number, diversity, and severity of children labeled “special

education.” Principals also were unaware of procedures to be followed when disciplining students with disabilities.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) are based on a framework of knowledge, dispositions, and performances that provide a common vision for effective school leadership. In examining these standards in relation to special education leadership, the preparation needs for school principals becomes alarmingly clear.

Success of All Students

Standard 1

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

Lack of special education preparation for school principals is challenging their ability to serve all students (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), over 6 million of our nation’s children are enrolled in special education programs. With increasing enrollment of students in special education, the role of the principal has drastically changed, particularly in light of identifying and providing required special education services. Although the responsibility of the principal has increased, almost no state requires any training in special education for an individual to become licensed as a principal (Bateman & Bateman, 2001).

Since the first mandate for the provision of a free, appropriate public education for individuals with disabilities, a dual system of education has existed. Students are separated into groups labeled “special education” and “general education,” each group having its own teachers and administrators. Institutions of higher education traditionally have prepared both teachers and administrators to work within one of the separate

programs. In this dual system, the decision-making responsibility for providing special education and related services has been primarily with special education administrators and their staff members (Rhys, 1996). However, with the advent of new school reforms including site-based management and full inclusion of special education students, more principal involvement is demanded in the education of students with special needs.

General education administrators must be prepared to lead in all administrative areas, including special education, in order to reduce the separateness that has come to exist between general and special education and to create instructional programs that meet the needs of all students (Balt, 2000).

The position of educational leader, especially building principal, has become more demanding. Long hours, low pay, and increased accountability for test scores on state tests discourage many potential leaders. At the same time, retirements are thinning the ranks of present administrators, with few to take their place. In the next decade, 40% of the principals now in jobs will retire (Bowser, 2001) and the need for special education training is even greater for new administrators entering the field.

Effective school leaders must understand how to mobilize their communities to tackle challenging issues and confront problems that have not been addressed successfully. By placing effective student learning as the primary focus for all improvement efforts, principals need to recognize their responsibility for the education of all students (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

An Instructional Program Conducive to Student Learning

Standard 2

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Today's principals are dealing with children with physical, emotional/behavioral, and learning disorders as well as those with significant health care needs. Many children have multiple disabilities. Principals are overwhelmed by the intensity necessary to provide strong leadership to teachers in the instruction of students with high-incidence disabilities. The managerial responsibilities including reporting, compliance, program management, accountability, and decreased resources can paralyze efforts leaving students needs unmet.

School principals are instrumental in providing the leadership for implementing and monitoring inclusionary practices (Katsyannis, Conderman, & Franks, 1996). Although inclusion has been a focus of recent school reform, many principals are still unfamiliar and uncomfortable with its concept and practice (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001). Anderson (1999) stated that resistance toward inclusive reforms by principals is often due to lack of training rather than negative perceptions or attitudes toward special education. It is important that inclusive principals understand the historical background of special education as well as current trends and practices in an effort to facilitate change in schools. In a recent study of 61 elementary school principals in Iowa, one of the main themes that emerged regarding inclusive practices was where administrators could get training and support to address these new inclusion issues (Brotherson et al.). Other outcomes from this study's focus groups included concerns about limited training and ongoing support in early childhood education, concerns about the ever-increasing numbers of children and how to place them correctly, and concerns about finding broadly skilled staff members to teach inclusive classes. Another concern

deals with principals' lack of knowledge about how to evaluate the quality of programs for inclusion once they are implemented (Brotherson et al.).

Principals that value diversity in the student population will provide opportunities for all teachers and students to learn valuable skills essential to living and working within a diverse world (Goor et al., 1997). In contrast, principals' negative attitudes based upon the belief that special needs students require a disproportionate amount of time and resources or that these students should be educated in more segregated environments, hamper the administration of special education in school buildings (Goor & Schwenn, 1995). Given that beliefs influence perception and guide behavior, and given that the leadership role of a principal affects special education services, training programs for principals must address their beliefs (Goor et al.). Effective principals model positive attitudes toward acceptance of all children, visit special education classrooms, spend time with students with special needs, tour the building daily, and become involved with the concerns of all students and programs (Van Horn, Burrello, & DeClue, 1992).

A Safe, Efficient, and Effective Learning Environment

Standard 3

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

Special education teachers often solicit principals' advice on discipline. All behavior management strategies may not be effective intervention for all students. When developing behavior management strategies for students with special needs, the principal should take into consideration the student's disability and how the disability affects the student's behavior. Lack of awareness of the various types of disabilities and successful intervention strategies will limit the principal's effectiveness. The principal needs to

know what to do if a student with disabilities has to be suspended from school for a severe problem and how the suspension will affect the student's placement and services. A principal has to exercise caution when suspending students with special needs because the courts place the burden of proof on the school in determining if the behavior was a result of the student's disability (Bartlett, 1989). If principals are not aware of special education policies, strategies, or techniques, they may be ineffective in developing an intervention plan to help correct students' behavior.

One of the challenges principals face in today's school is the amount of administrative time spent on special education programs. In a Texas study of elementary and secondary principals, Bravenec (1998) reported that 71% spent one quarter of a 40-hour workweek dealing with issues concerning special education. One in five principals reported spending up to one half of a 40-hour workweek dealing with special education issues. To add to the frustration, 50% of principals reported that 50% to 75% of the responsibility of supervision and evaluation of special education programs is theirs. Balt (2000) documented a principal's statement from her California study:

Educational leadership gets lost in the shuffle. I don't feel like an educational leader much of the time and I think that's more magnified with the special education kids. There's so many of them that have really huge behavioral problems...I don't feel like I spend anywhere near enough time with the teachers on curriculum, instruction, meeting goals, adapting things at all. But on the other hand, to me, that's the most important. (p. 95)

Promoting Success

Standard 4

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

As more students with a diverse range of disabilities are being included in general education classrooms and activities, principals are discovering they have gaps in their

preparation for leadership of special education. Educational leadership is ranked as the key variable associated with effective schools (Goor et al., 1997). Principals' attitudes toward special education and the needs of children with disabilities is a major determinant in the success of special programs. Morton (2000) stated that most general education principals, and even some special education principals, are unfamiliar with effective strategies to educate students with disabilities outside of separate special education classrooms. To this end, principals must be able to facilitate collaborative planning and problem solving between general and special educators, other specialists, students, and family members (Williams & Katsiyannis, 1998). The professional development programs that are offered at the district and university levels have made feeble attempts to prepare principals for their changing roles. What is missing is connecting effective leadership to special education in general education settings.

Acting With Integrity, Fairness, and in an Ethical Manner

Standard 5

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

Federal regulations are comprehensive on the responsibility of the school principal to provide the least restrictive learning environment for all children. The responsibilities for assuring the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulation is implemented are clearly spelled out to school administrators. Ignorance or lack of knowledge of the law is not an acceptable defense in a court of law for a principal not to enforce federal mandates and regulations.

Many principals, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the job, appoint designees (usually assistant principals) to deal with the special education administration. Smith and Colon (1998) asserted that appointing an administrative designee is one of the most

dangerous misconceptions in the field. When designees are in charge, they may have no better knowledge of students' and parents' rights than the principal. Consequently, court battles and other forms of disagreement may arise due to the designees' ignorance of the law and the process.

The implications of principals not following the letter of the law could be costly for school districts. For example, Tucker (2002) reported that a federal judge ordered the Washington, DC public school system to pay \$1 million to two contract schools, Educational Transition Services and Rock Creek Academy, for providing services to students. As a result of this order, the school district threatened to close their schools because the amount was more than half of the \$1.7 million the city owed for past services.

Gaps in training regarding special education laws as reported by Rhys (1996) and Nardone (1999) confirm the lack of preparation by stating school principals lack knowledge of special education legal issues, specifically in compliance and procedural requirements as legally mandated by IDEA. The 1990 version of IDEA requires school administrators to participate in IEP meetings to determine appropriate services for students with disabilities (Goor et al., 1997). Yet, it is the tendency of many principals to delegate their responsibilities to others, which increase liabilities (Goor et al.). Decisions are sometimes made that do not protect the students' and parents' rights. Students' placements are sometimes inappropriate and consideration is not always given to placement in the less restrictive setting. In addition, principals are responsible for helping facilitate transition planning for students with special needs as they progress through the educational system (Alper, Schloss, & Schloss, 1996). Knowledge of special education

legal issues needs to be an important component of a principal's educational background. Parents with special needs students are becoming more knowledgeable of the complexities and ambiguities of legal mandates of special education. If principals are not knowledgeable of special education laws and regulations, they risk lawsuits and perhaps the loss of their job. By not educating themselves in special education law, principals may place their district in jeopardy of not meeting compliance guidelines, and ultimately in unwanted litigation (Nardone). Most importantly, principals' lack of knowledge of these regulations may affect the outcome of services for students with disabilities.

The Larger Context

Standard 6

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 extends significant implications for school administrators. The revised regulations mandate that school administrators: possess knowledge of IDEA requirements (e.g., eligibility, placement, performance goals, and assessment of student outcomes); demonstrate awareness of instructional strategies that are conducive to the needs of diverse learners; possess the capacity to provide opportunities for necessary training of school personnel; and provide ongoing support and assistance to teachers (Anderson, 1999). The most recent reauthorization of IDEA passed on April 30, 2003, and includes new provisions to streamline discipline policies, reduce paperwork requirements, and improve professional development (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

The professional development programs offered at most district and university levels have made feeble attempts to prepare principals for their changing roles. Currently

only 12 states require special education coursework for general administrative certification, and 45% of all states do not require a general knowledge of special education in order to receive an administrative endorsement (Nardone, 1999).

Recent studies of school principals found that special education was the factor reported as having the most consistent effect on principals' time, enthusiasm, ability to lead schools, and frustration level (Balt, 2000; Smith & Colon, 1998). Many new administrators report being ill prepared for the job and cite difficulties with role clarification and job specialization (Ashby & Maki, 1996). The results of a study by Balt indicated that principals do not understand special education and feel unprepared for their roles as administrators of special education programs.

An Integrated Preparation Model

Despite the fact that special education is now a big part of the principal's job, people coming out of administrator preparation programs often seem to lack knowledge regarding special education program operations (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). In order for school administrators to provide quality services for all students, there needs to be more opportunities for them to receive appropriate training to deal with crucial issues regarding special education services. What principals "most desperately need" is a firm foundation in special education policy and legal issues (Balt, 2000). Yet in Balt's study, many principals indicated they had not participated in any specific workshops or conferences regarding special education sponsored by a professional organization or a public school agency. Several other recent studies (Davidson & Gooden, 2001; Lowe & Bringham, 2000) also point to gaps in special education training, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels and in professional development.

Principals need adequate preparation for their most important role of providing educational leadership for all children. According to Anderson (1999), despite the implication for school administrators to be trained in special education laws and policies, most school administrators have received little, if any, training related to special education in their leadership preparation training. Anderson further stated that most principals continue to rely on central office staff (i.e., directors of special education and consultants) as primary sources of information and guidance in providing leadership to students, staff members, and programs within their schools.

In order for preparation programs to change, true collaboration between special educators and principal preparation leaders must become part of our practice. Preparation programs for principal leadership must improve in preparing principals for leadership in special education by ensuring principals have prerequisite knowledge in assessing the effect of disabilities on student performance, monitoring referral-to-placement procedures, managing records and confidentiality issues, employing assistive technology, and facilitating parent involvement (Goor et al., 1997). Aspiring principals must also develop competencies in special education that will facilitate the unification of general and special education reform efforts.

The challenge is not easy, but those preparing for leadership need particular training in skills necessary to deal with crucial issues around growing special education needs. In order for all children to obtain quality educational services, it is imperative that principals receive necessary training to acquire a knowledge base in special education and competence to ensure compliance with the law. Professional development for principals needs to be a “seamless garment” that extends through preservice, induction,

career changes, and retirement (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1992). Today's principals need relevant and practical training that will give them the knowledge and skills they need to deal with managerial operations of schools, legal issues, problem analysis, and various interpersonal skills related to special education administration (Balt, 2000). Programs for principal preparation must integrate coursework and field-based experiences to allow interns to apply special education competencies and skills in schools.

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