

Preparing Educational Leaders for Special Education Success: Principals' Perspectives

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Abstract: *School leadership preparation programs often lack content pertaining to the knowledge necessary to assure quality programs for students with disabilities. With current trends in educational leadership orienting toward a foundation of social justice, this fact is particularly troubling. The researchers of this study were interested in what principals believed leadership preparation programs should include in terms of knowledge associated with the success of students with diverse learning needs. Sixty-four principals in a southern metropolitan school district responded to a survey to find answers to this question. Results indicated several areas of high importance: Curriculum modification; discipline guidelines; state testing options and accommodations; knowledge of applicable laws, creating an inclusive culture, and mentoring new special educators.*

Keywords: *principal preparation, school leadership, special education*

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Ongoing mandates to include students with disabilities in standardized testing have provided a long awaited reason to focus on the educational attainment of this minority group of students. Social justice would seem to demand that educational leaders be provided with appropriately focused coursework within educational leadership preparation programs to meet the needs of such a diverse set of learners. With this in

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mind, the researchers were interested in what current principals believe preparation programs should be teaching to best prepare future principals with the skills and knowledge needed to narrow the achievement gap of this diverse set of students.

PREPARING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SUCCESS: PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES

The notion of social justice involves ensuring that the rights of minority populations are upheld and supported along side the rights of the traditional majority. Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leadership as ensuring that "...issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States (are) central to (each educational leader's) advocacy, leadership, practice and vision." (p. 223) Perhaps nowhere is the notion of social justice more important for educational leaders than when they are faced with issues involving the education of students with disabilities (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Unfortunately, disability related issues remain largely absent within the bulk of leadership preparation programs (Burton, 2008). Interestingly, most educational leaders do not focus on special education issues until confronted by a potential lawsuit with substantial related costs to their school and district budgets (Strader, 2007).

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed overwhelmingly with bipartisan support in Congress as an indication of the nation's pledge to ensure educational quality for all children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The passing of this law raised concerns within many school districts when it included students with special needs in the district's mandates for student achievement accountability. The law resulted in school leaders coming under intense pressure to produce standards-based reforms that would result in increased test scores for all students, including those receiving special education services.

In addition to the standards set forth in NCLB, the 2004 re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) reaffirmed the need for students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive settings (Wright & Wright, 2006). This has largely been interpreted to assert that students with disabilities should be placed in the general education classroom as a starting point for a least restrictive environment (LRE) rather than be pulled out to more segregated settings (Salend, 2005). To successfully educate students with their typically developing peers, it stands to reason that school teachers and leaders should hold an adequate knowledge of both typical and special education laws, teaching methods and inclusive educational practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous applicable studies indicate school leaders may not possess adequate knowledge regarding best practices in the education of students with disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006; Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013). School leaders impact the achievement of all students, hence their preparation to teach all learners, including those with disabilities, can be inferred to be a significant part of the overall student achievement equation (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007).

Two decades ago, Burrello, Schrup, and Barnett, (1992) asserted that there were limited established preparation programs that met the need to educate pre-service

school leaders on the concepts and processes necessary to provide informed leadership for special education programs. Also in 1992, a study on special education knowledge and requirements for school administrators conducted by Valesky and Hirth revealed that after studying post secondary programs intended to prepare candidates for this endorsement, the number requiring a knowledge of special education law was disappointing. These authors noted that only three states required a special education law course for principals, instructional supervisors, and superintendents. These authors further noted that for those receiving a general administrator endorsement, a special education law course was required in only two states (Valesky & Hirth, 1992).

Thirteen years later, a similar study by Zaretsky, Moreau and Faircloth (2005) showed a continued and distressing lack of progress in this area. These authors reviewed principal preparation programs in both Canada and the United States finding them severely lacking in providing the necessary knowledge required by school leaders to successfully craft an environment conducive to the learning of students with disabilities (Zaretshy et al., 2005).

Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, and Liebert (2006) noted in a study focusing on inclusive educational practice, that recurrently inclusive practice was misunderstood by school leaders. These researchers went on to assert that in part due to this misunderstanding of inclusive practice, complex factors that were required to make inclusive education a sustained reality were adversely affected. They noted that misunderstandings in part, contributed to leadership changes, teacher turnover, and district assessment policies that resulted in reduced support for inclusive programs and culminated in the reduction of inclusive practice within their study's school locations.

Still other studies note that school leaders, teachers, and other related service providers have accentuated the need for more appropriate training on issues regarding special education (Friend & Pope, 2005; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007). Developing appropriate programs and services, legal compliance, knowledge of individual disabilities, relationship building, social networking, necessary supplementary aids and services, and appropriate instructional methodologies were among a few of their concerns (Bowlby, Peters, & Mackinnon, 2001; Zaretsky, 2003; 2005).

Garrison et al. (2007) suggested the importance of principal knowledge regarding special education as well. In their study regarding inclusive leadership, the authors noted that knowledge regarding differentiation of instruction, the ability to coach special educators, providing appropriate professional development, as well as allowing on-going opportunities for special educators to collaborate represents knowledge an inclusive leader should command.

Overall, researchers have found that there is a lack of preparation of school leaders as it pertains to the knowledge necessary for these leaders to assure quality programs that result in prolonged academic and adult life success for students with disabilities (Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Zaretsky, 2004). It is clear that school leaders must be equipped with an in-depth, specialized knowledge of students with special education needs or the twin specters of assessment based accountability and mandated inclusive practice may not produce desirable results for the most important component of this equation—the students.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP REFORM EFFORTS

An association of ten stakeholder organizations created the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) in 1994 for the purpose of developing standards to carry the educational leadership profession into the 21st century (Thompson, 1999). Their original (1996) and their updated 2008 standards were largely similar, each containing six standards of educational leadership with mostly similar language (Wilhoit, 2008). Regrettably, both the original and updated versions of the ISLLC standards (Table 1) and performance indicators made no specific mention of special education knowledge needed by principals. One notable change in wording from “all” students to “every” student in all of the updated standards may be inferred by some, to indicate the inclusion of students at all ability levels. Even so, these standards remain lacking a direct indication that the standards are meant to include those with disabilities.

Table 1. *ISLLC 2008 Standards**

Standard Number	Standard Content
1	An educational leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.
2	An educational leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3	An educational leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4	An educational leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5	An educational leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6	An educational leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

*(Wilhoit, 2008)

Six years after the publication of the first draft of the ISLLC Standards, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) published Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership. This publication was based on the original ISLLC Standards, but a more updated list of performance indicators emerged. Within these standards, three references to individuals with disabilities were apparent: (a) Standard two, performance indicator 2.1a suggests “Candidates assess school culture using multiple methods and implement context-appropriate strategies that capitalize on the diversity (e.g., population, language, disability, gender, race, socio-economic) of the school community to improve school programs and culture.” (p. 4) (b) Performance indicator 4.2c suggests that candidates “provide leadership to programs serving students with special and exceptional needs” (p.11). (c) And finally, performance indicator 6.3c describes how candidates must “promote equitable learning opportunities

and success for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, disability, or other individual characteristics" (p. 15).

In 2008, the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) concluded a major effort to collect a knowledge base devoted to educational administration. To that end, researchers, authors, scholars, practicing school leaders/administrators, and others associated with school leadership submitted their ideas and values regarding the needs of educational leaders (NCPEA, 2008). Beginning in 2008, NCPEA began an electronic review system to streamline and strengthen the article base of knowledge related to school leadership through an on-going partnership with Rice University and its "NCPEA Connexions" project. This remains an on-going effort. This effort, in contrast to the ISLLC standards, do not assert themselves as standards based (NCPEA, 2008), but instead simply focus on trying to collect knowledge that principals/school leaders feel they need to be successful educational leaders in schools. This project, again in contrast to the ISLLC standards, contains 20 areas of interest to those interested in obtaining school leadership knowledge, one of which is dedicated to the administration of "special programs" (NCPEA, 2008). Subsection one of this area project is specifically labeled as "Special Education" and contains knowledge articles that focus on inclusion, bilingual education, at-risk populations and homebound educational services (NCPEA, 2008). Although the vast amount of knowledge articles within the Connexions project are not directly related to the administration and leadership of students being served under the label of special education, it is notable to acknowledge that special education leadership is addressed in the context of this knowledge base (NCPEA, 2008).

Another notable reform effort is that of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). The NASSP, and their collaborating partners, through the Principal Preparation Task Force have entered into an on-going effort to identify strategies to assist school leaders in meeting the challenges of today's schools. This effort has resulted in recommendations regarding the preparation of school leaders. These recommendations include the need for a stringent recruitment process, specific program content outlines, participation in internships and an emphasis on succession planning (NASSP, 2007).

In a large study conducted through the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute and commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, researchers focused on the examination of eight program models that address key issues in developing quality leaders (Darling-Hammond & LaPointe, 2007). Among the findings offered within this body of research was the statistic showing that 80% of superintendents and 69% of principals reported in a survey that leadership preparation programs were not well connected with the demands of the modern diverse educational setting (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Final reports explaining aspects of the eight exemplary programs emphasized aspects of principal preparation programs that include research based content, curricular coherence, field-based internships, problem-based learning strategies, cohort structures, mentoring and collaboration between universities and school districts (Darling-Hammond & LaPointe, 2007). It is notable that within one of the final documents produced, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Case Studies of Exemplary Programs*, the words "special education" appeared only once in the 99 page document. As evidenced, exemplary leadership preparation programs outlined in the document focused on the daily requirements of school leadership, which may be inferred to include issues involving special education services. However, the document does not

specifically mention this large minority group of students within its coverage of exemplary leadership preparation program.

The theoretical framework of this research is social justice. If the rights of socially marginalized populations are to be understood and accounted for, certainly educational leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed choices concerning that population. People with diverse learning abilities have long represented an underserved and underperforming population of students within the educational system but still, the literature seems to indicate that educational leaders remain largely untrained to support the needs of this group. The purpose of this study then, was to find out what principals believed leadership preparation programs should include in terms of knowledge associated with the success of students with diverse learning needs. Through a better understand of the needs of educational leaders in this area, perhaps leadership preparation programs can incorporate findings as they address this important issue.

METHOD

To answer the question of what principals believe should be included in principal preparation programs regarding special education, the researchers used a survey to acquire the necessary information required to make recommendations for school preparation program improvement.

The target population for this study consisted of 190 elementary, middle and high school principals in a southern metropolitan school district. The list of principals was obtained via the organization's public web site where all e-mail and surface mail addresses were posted.

The study was conducted using Dillman's (2000) Tailored Design Method. The procedure included: (a) pre-notice on week one, (b) the questionnaire delivered on week two, (c) a thank you and reminder on week three, and (d) a replacement questionnaire on Week 4.

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument was a questionnaire designed by the researchers employing 22 Likert-designed questions and two open-ended questions. It was constructed based on gaps within the ISLLC Standards recognized as such by contrasting the ISLLC standards with current research regarding what educational leaders should know to administer effective educational programs for individuals with disabilities. Survey questions also came from a prior validated survey used in dissertation research on a similar topic (Kritsonis, 1992). The survey was shown to a focus group of five educational administrators and five education professors prior to distribution. Items were analyzed as to if each contained relevant information concerning the administration of special education programs in public school settings. There was an 80-100% agreement among all administrators and professors for each item represented on the survey.

In total, 22 questions were presented as statements to respondents (Table 2). After reading each statement, respondents indicated their perception of the importance of the item stated. Respondents were given the option to respond on a five-point scale. This scale included: 1) Not at all important, 2) Minor or very minor importance, 3) Moderate importance, 4) Great Importance and 5) Very great or Highest importance. Additionally Three open-ended questions were provided (Table 3).

RESULTS

A total of 64 out of 190 surveys were returned for a response rate of 34%. Twenty-two surveys were received via the Internet and 42 through surface mail. Data were analyzed in order to answer the question as to what principals' considered is most important to be included in leadership preparation programs regarding special education. The items that participants viewed as the most important were determined by combining response categories. The response categories were then combined into

Table 2. Item Frequencies and Percentages for Principal Questionnaire:

Questionnaire Items	Minor/ Very Minor Importance		Great/ Moderate Importance		Highest/Very Great Importance	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Knowledge of how to create and maintain an inclusive culture and climate that emphasizes high expectations for students with disabilities.	0	0.0	14	22.3	49	77.7
Knowledge of instructional leadership as it applies to teachers of individuals with disabilities.	0	0.0	16	25.4	47	74.6
Knowledge of research-based models of instruction and instructional strategies that are effective with ESL learners and students with disabilities.	0	0.0	20	31.8	43	68.2
Knowledge of how to mentor and support new and existing special education teachers.	1	1.5	13	20.7	49	77.8
Knowledge of how to modify and adapt the general curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners.	0	0.0	7	11.1	56	88.9
Knowledge of how to align curriculum and IEP goals with local, state, and national standards.	0	0.0	17	27.0	46	73.0
Knowledge of state testing options and accommodations for students with disabilities.	0	0.0	12	19.3	50	80.7
Knowledge of best practices in teaching individuals with disabilities in order to assist in performing teacher evaluations.	0	0.0	17	27.4	45	72.6
Knowledge of how to effectively implement inclusion and co-teaching.	1	1.6	14	22.5	47	75.8
Knowledge of technology-based resources available to assist students with disabilities.	0	0.0	26	42.0	36	58.0
Knowledge of research-based school-wide discipline and behavior programs.	0	0.0	16	26.2	45	73.8
Knowledge of research-based classroom discipline and behavior programs.	0	0.0	15	24.2	47	75.8
Knowledge how to strengthen relationships with parents of students with disabilities.	0	0.0	20	32.3	42	67.7
Knowledge of how to build community relationships to assist in accommodating needs of students with disabilities.	0	0.0	28	45.1	34	54.9
Knowledge of the characteristics and causes of the disabilities categorized under IDEA.	2	3.2	28	45.2	32	51.6
Knowledge of funding sources and other resources available for individuals with disabilities.	3	4.9	30	49.2	28	45.9
Knowledge of the law regarding IDEA and NCLB.	1	1.6	12	19.7	48	78.7
Knowledge of Individualized Education Plans (IEP's)	0	0.0	14	22.6	48	77.4

Knowledge of legal guidelines for disciplining students with disabilities.	0	0.0	8	12.9	54	87.1
Knowledge of how to effectively advocate for individuals with disabilities	2	3.2	24	38.7	36	58.1
Knowledge of appropriate transition options, outcomes, and programs for students with disabilities.	0	0.0	23	37.7	38	62.3
Knowledge of how to avoid over-representation of minorities in special education.	2	3.2	14	22.6	46	74.2

Table 3. *Open Ended Questionnaire Items*

Item number	Narrative
1	About how much of your professional day (on average) do you spend working on issues related directly or indirectly to special education? Response Options: (0% - 100%) + Comment box
2	How many total hours of professional training related to special education did you receive over the past year? Response Options: Comment box
3	Have you been involved with any legal proceedings regarding special education students in your professional career as an educational leader (i.e.: as an administrator)? Response Options: Comment box

three new categories. Category one (not at all important) was combined with category two (minor or very minor importance). Note that none of the questions received a response of “not at all important” therefore the first combined category dropped that label from the new title. Category three (moderate importance) was combined with category four (great importance) and category five (highest/very great importance) was not combined. The combined categories were then re-labeled to form the following three groupings: 1) Highest/Very Great Importance; 2) Great/Moderate Importance; and 3) Minor/Very Minor Importance. The resultant three categories were then analyzed utilizing a frequency analysis to determine which survey questions received the highest percentage of responses (see Table 2). Figure 1 illustrates the findings of the frequency analysis. The issues that were determined to be of Highest/Very Great Importance to 75% or greater of respondents were questions number 5–How to modify curriculum; 19–IDEA discipline guidelines; 7–State testing accommodations; 4–Mentoring new special education teachers; 1–Inclusive culture; 17–Special education law; 18–IEP’s; 9–Inclusion and co-teaching; and 12–Classroom discipline. 100% of items were responded to with either category two (great/moderate importance) or category three (highest/very great importance) at a rate of over 95%.

Open-ended question (Table 3) data collected revealed that current administrators spend an average of 16% of their day on special education related matters, with a range of five to 70%. The majority of the respondents (63 out of 64) indicated that they had received an average of seven hours of special education training in the past year prior to taking the survey.

DISCUSSION

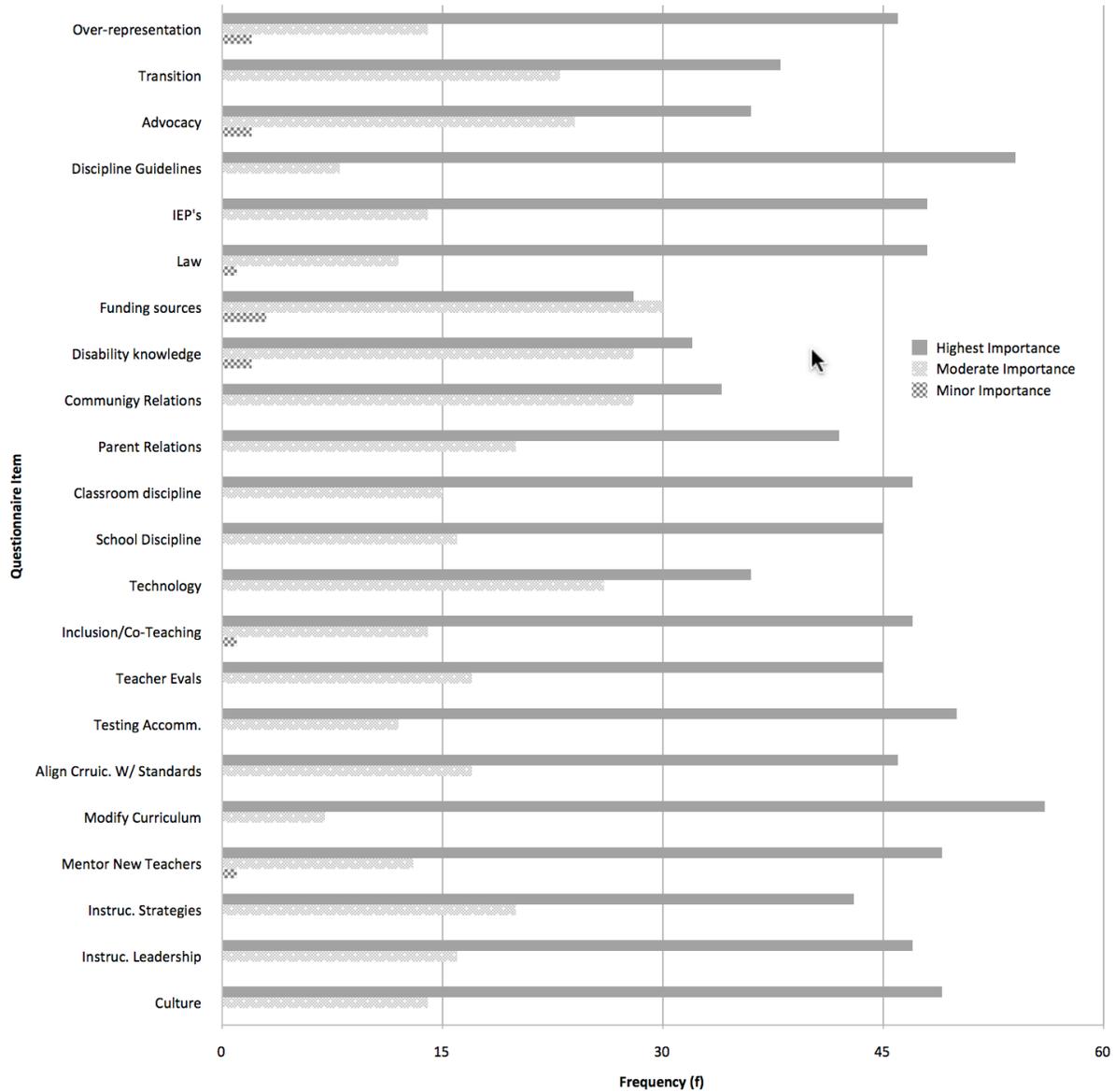
The results of this study are consistent with the findings of other researchers in this arena (Bowlby et al., 2001; Zaretsky, 2003). The same items that were of concern to principals in prior research studies continue to be troublesome today. Principals have emphasized the need for better training in matters related to special education. Eighty-eight point nine percent of the principals responding to this study expressed that there was a high/very great need to have knowledge concerning how to modify and adapt the general curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) mandates that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum and in many cases that means such students require modifications and adaptations in order to comply with that mandate. This can be a daunting task with ineffective results if little or no prior instructional preparation has taken place for how to comply with the mandate.

Approximately 87% of principals surveyed indicated a need for knowledge of legal guidelines for disciplining students with disabilities. Thirty-four percent of respondents indicated that they had been involved in legal proceedings regarding special education students. Again, IDEA is specific when it comes to the steps necessary to ensure appropriate discipline of students with disabilities. Terms such as manifestation meeting, interim alternative placement, change of placement, and no cessation, may likely cause anxiety for administrators struggling to navigate the complex maze of requirements, particularly if not trained.

One of the outcomes of the No Child Left Behind Act addressed accountability for results. This accountability continues to pertain to all students, including those with special needs. Through the act, schools remain responsible for any failing test scores and they are responsible for setting goals to improve the scores of all students. In an age of high-stakes testing, school administrators need knowledge about state testing options and accommodations that are allowable for students with disabilities. Failure to properly implement testing options and accommodations may increase frustration for students and decrease overall test school or district scores. Eighty-one percent of respondents indicated that this information was of highest or very great importance to be included in what is taught in principal preparation programs.

NCLB complements many tenets of IDEA. These laws were designed to ensure an appropriate education for all students, and the researchers contend that they cannot be properly implemented if school leadership has limited or no knowledge of their fundamental underpinnings. Seventy-nine percent of administrators surveyed indicated that a high/very great importance should be placed on dissemination of knowledge regarding these two laws.

Figure 1. *Survey Response Frequencies (n=64)*



Individualized Education Plans are the backbone of IDEA. They represent a tool designed to ensure an appropriate education. Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings must be attended by an administrator who should play an active role in discussion and determination of appropriate programs and services for the student. Just over 77% of principals indicated that receiving proper education on the content and writing of IEP's is of the highest importance.

Of the research that has been conducted on what principals know about special education, much of it deals with one aspect—the law (Kritsonis, 1992; Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Zaretsky et al., 2005). However, we know that a principal's leadership can determine the success of a school and principals of successful schools focus on much more than just the law. Effective schools focus on curriculum, teaching and learning, mentoring, culture, instructional leadership, high expectations, assessment, and effective discipline among other things (McEwan, 2003; Jamentz, 2002; Murphy, 2003; Senge, 2000). With fully 100% of items being responded to as indicating a great to very great

level of importance with no less than a 95% level, the principals in this study seemed to concur with that premise.

The results of this study give further credence to the literature that has been discussed in this document outlining the lack of preparation principals have received to lead special education communities within their schools. Thirty-two percent of respondents indicated that they received no special education training in their principal preparation programs. Of the 68% who said they had received training, many made unsolicited comments that the training they had received was interspersed with other topics and not a component unto itself.

Results indicating that principals received an average of seven hours of professional development in the area of special education in the last year were consistent with the findings of Zaretsky et al. (2005). It is sophistry to believe in or expect achievement gap closure of diverse populations when it appears that educational leaders are not being prepared with the necessary tools.

Future repercussions for continuing to neglect special education in administration preparation programs include the continuation of poor educational results for this population. NCLB and IDEA gave a framework, however the knowledge of how to implement that framework appears to be inconsequential. Doing the same things and expecting different results do not seem to be a reasonable conclusion nor a way to promote progress in preparing educational leaders for the issues they will encounter in today's schools.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers acknowledge that it would have been more effective to have the respondents rank the items that they felt were the most important in order to understand priorities better. This coupled with including a method for them to record the amount of time they spent dealing with each question area on a daily basis would have given the researchers a more complete picture of priority.

Because this study was performed with principals in an urban school district, results may be limited to this setting. Rural, suburban, or even private school settings may not have the same issues, problem areas, or special education student population to manage. It is important to note that the time of year that this study was performed may have had an impact on the amount of time principals reported that they spend on special education related matters on a daily basis. In the district where this study was performed, a large amount of time was traditionally spent on special education issues at the beginning of the year, and an even greater amount of time at the end of the year when conducting Individualized Education Plan meetings. This study was done mid-year which may have lent itself to a smaller reported mean of time spent on special education related matters (16%).

While the overall response rate was somewhat low (34%), the response rate by mode of survey (34% Internet, 66% surface mail) was consistent with other studies utilizing the same survey methodology (Kittleson, 1995; Kwak & Radler, 2000). Another limitation of this research remains the fact that the study was conducted within only one southern school district. Still, the fact that the findings from this district remain consistent with those found in previous studies going back decade's remains a troubling matter.

While the researchers were hoping for a higher response rate, the results of this research clearly indicate that current educational administrators feel strongly about the importance of educating future administrators in matters pertaining to special

education. Especially relevant are the areas related to the law regarding IDEA, NCLB, state testing accommodations, and discipline, as well as the modification and adaptation of curriculum for students with disabilities.

SUMMARY

In order to narrow the achievement gap existing between the general and special education student populations, educational leaders must know how to provide the instruction and leadership necessary to meet each subgroup's academic needs. Also, the amount of time administrators spend on special education on a daily basis illuminates the necessity of including coursework on this topic in educational leadership programs. Notions of social justice would seem to support that such leaders must deconstruct any preexisting assumptions and attitudes concerning students with special needs and begin to reconstruct a framework of high expectations and inclusiveness. Surely, the trends found in this and previous research must change if we are to meet this worthy goal.

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