

Principals and Special Education: The Critical Role of School Leaders

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education
and the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

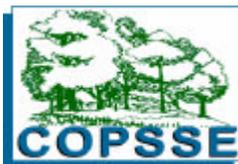
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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

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INTRODUCTION

Special education presents one of the major challenges facing school leaders in this era of comprehensive school reform. Research suggests that the principal's role is pivotal in the special education process; however, few school leaders are well prepared for this responsibility. This paper examines key leadership issues related to effective special education and reviews emerging standards for principal performance to determine the knowledge and skills that effective school leaders need. Recommendations for future research and leadership preparation are offered.

For more than a quarter of a century, schools have been challenged to meet both the intent and the spirit of federal laws regarding the education of students with disabilities. At the same time, our nation has also embraced a far-reaching set of academic school reforms designed to make schools more rigorous learning environments. As the pressures in schools mount, many have questioned the impact these efforts are having on students with disabilities and others at risk for academic failure.

Recognizing the need to safeguard the educational rights of all students, recent federal legislation has addressed these concerns. The 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] specified that students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum and participate in assessments. No Child Left Behind [NCLB], a sweeping 2002 reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] creates additional provisions to ensure that no children—especially those with the greatest learning needs—are neglected in standards-driven learning environments. NCLB redefines the federal role in K-12 education with the goal of closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. States must establish standards and test every student's progress using tests designed for the standards.

As expectations and pressures have continued to rise, principal leadership in school reform has become increasingly more important. The relationship between principal leadership and special education has not received much attention until recently. Papers and reports related to the roles and responsibilities of principals in effective schools generally do not make specific references to the needs of students with disabilities and special education teachers. During the past decade, however, emerging research has demonstrated a significant relationship between special education teacher attrition and school leadership.

EVOLUTION OF THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

Until the 1970s, principals served as building managers and student disciplinarians. Over the past 30 years, principals also became responsible for instructional leadership. Studies of effective schools have identified five instructional leadership priorities of effective principals: (a) defining and communicating the school's educational mission, (b) managing curriculum and instruction, (c) supporting and supervising teaching, (d) monitoring student progress, and (e) promoting a learning climate. These priorities keep effective administrators focused on student learning and professional development. As a result, effective leaders are familiar with current research, find necessary resources, make well-reasoned judgments regarding students' programs, mentor new teachers, provide professional opportunities for all staff members, and evaluate teacher performance.

Effective principals have become responsible for shaping a positive school culture. These principals skillfully engage stakeholders, for example, students, teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals, other support personnel, families, business partners. Together they develop child-centered communities that are based on shared values and beliefs, a coherent vision of the future, and a mission to educate all students well.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Research has demonstrated that principals who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high-quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities and for others at risk for school failure. But one of the greatest challenges in schools is the lack of qualified special education teachers. In addition, as a result of growing concerns about special education teacher attrition, various professional organizations now emphasize the importance of the principal's role in effective special education. For example, the Council for Exceptional Children [CEC] and National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP] recently published a guide designed to help principals implement IDEA effectively. This document is based on the premise that effective principals ensure that diverse needs of students and their families are addressed through five major elements of school: organization, curriculum and instruction, professional development, climate, and student assessment. Administrators who clearly understand the needs of students with disabilities, IDEA, and the instructional challenges that educators who work with students with disabilities face are better prepared to provide appropriate support.

In summary, effective leaders are committed to the success of all students and collaborate with others to achieve this aim. In their schools, classroom heterogeneity is the norm, and they invest the time necessary to devise policies and procedures that enable teams to perform their jobs successfully.

PRINCIPALS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Research suggests that most principals lack the course work and field experience needed to lead local efforts to create learning environments that emphasize academic success for students with disabilities. Consequently, effective administrators need to develop a working knowledge about disabilities and the unique learning and behavioral challenges various conditions present. They need a thorough understanding of the laws that protect the educational rights of students with disabilities. Without a solid understanding of IDEA and NCLB, principals cannot administer special education programs effectively.

Principals who understand effective research-based practices and recognize the instructional demands that classroom teachers and building specialists face can provide more appropriate support to these professionals. Effective principals know their own professional strengths and interests; understand the time constraints they face; recognize staff members' talents, skills, and professional growth interests and needs; and know how to foster shared leadership to support new instructional initiatives.

Given the complexity of federal and state rules and regulations and limited special education experience, it is not surprising that many principals feel poorly prepared for these responsibilities. They report the need for additional knowledge and skills to help them develop and implement appropriate programs and support systems for these students. In a recent study, principals identified help and information about implementing successful special education programs as their greatest need.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES, GROWING PRINCIPAL SHORTAGES, AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

In addition to expectations for effective instructional leadership, many other non-instructional responsibilities have been added to the principal's job over the past 30 years, for example, greater professional accountability and increased expectations regarding home-school communication.

Other traditional responsibilities—such as ensuring a safe environment, managing the budget, and maintaining discipline—have become increasingly complex and time-consuming. At the same time, considerable decision making has been decentralized to local schools without clear guidelines. Principals must also handle the diverse responsibilities they face within the context of increasingly critical constituencies, for example, state and federal policymakers, families, community members, school boards, and professional associations. The balance between instructional leadership and management responsibilities also presents challenges for school administrators.

Given the complexity of the principal's job, rising expectations for both student and professional performance, and increased accountability and public scrutiny, it is not surprising that fewer teacher leaders are choosing career paths that result in administrative positions. A number of educational research organizations report principal shortages nationwide, and the current principal pool is aging. Shortages have required many school districts to employ uncertified individuals as principals.

Obviously, the shortage of qualified principals impacts the caliber of leadership in schools. It is difficult for individuals with little or no prior experience in schools to understand and appreciate the diverse needs of learners. A lack of administrative support is also cited as a primary reason why special education teachers leave their jobs. Clearly, the shortage of well-prepared, competent school principals has the potential to exacerbate the current nationwide shortage of special educators as well.

PREPARING PRINCIPALS FOR THE FUTURE: CREATING UNIFORM STANDARDS FOR LEADERSHIP

Over the years, licensure requirements for school principals have varied widely between the 50 states. Because of widespread professional concerns about the preparation of principals, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) established the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to address these concerns. During the past decade, ISLLC has led a national initiative to create a common vision for effective school leadership. ISLLC developed unified standards and a professional development process. This approach ensures the use of research-based practices in preparing principals for their diverse, demanding roles.

A LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK BASED ON THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS

The paper reviews the ISLLC Standards that present the research-based knowledge and skills that administrators need to be effective school leaders. By placing effective student learning as the primary focus for all improvement efforts, the Standards emphasize a comprehensive understanding of effective teaching and learning dynamics.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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- 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.

CONCLUSIONS

It is well recognized by researchers, professional organizations, and others that all school personnel—school leaders in particular—must be prepared to advocate effectively for educational rights of all students if school reform goals are to be realized. University preparation programs, professional organizations, education researchers, state agencies, and local communities must work together to ensure that administrators develop the essential leadership needed to advocate effectively for the educational rights of diverse learners. State licensure requirements must include these elements.

In the interim, we must determine how to best support current building administrators as they attempt to meet the high level of expectations we hold for them. To facilitate professional growth, state and local agencies must provide leaders with easy access to useful information, such as new legislative action, case law precedents, regulation changes, relevant research, online resources, and upcoming professional development opportunities.

Although ISLLC Standards hold great promise, one unintended outcome has been the creation of longer personnel preparation programs at a time of increasing leadership shortages. As university preparation programs attempt to modify curricula to meet ISLLC competencies, few states have reduced the existing licensure requirements. To make administrative leadership a viable career move for teacher leaders, state departments of education, professional organizations, and universities must find innovative ways to prepare school leaders effectively while maintaining realistic course work and on-the-job expectations.

More research is needed to examine the role of the principal, improve the preparation process, and explore alternative school leadership models. Preparation programs must emphasize the development of distributive leadership skills that enable principals to organize their schools in ways that capitalize on the collective professional skills, knowledge, and experiences of stakeholders.

Given principals' roles and responsibilities, they are uniquely positioned to mobilize human and material resources that will provide supportive and challenging learning environments for all students. With capable instructional leaders, dedicated advocates for students and teachers, and skillful community builders, reform efforts will fail. To achieve the goals of school reform, effective leadership preparation must become a national priority.