

Special Education Administration at a Crossroads: Availability, Licensure, and Preparation Of Special Education Administrators

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

This paper reviews the availability, licensure, and preparation of special education administrators in K-12 public school districts. A major problem facing special education administrators is the recruitment, retention, and professional development of special education personnel. The level of administrative support special education personnel receive affects retention. Special education administrators are now at a crossroads in the evolution of the field. Their challenge will be promoting collaboration between general and special education teachers and administrators to assure that high quality educational programs are accessible to all students.

Special education administration is located at the intersection of the disciplines of special education, general education, and educational administration. Special education administrators are responsible for implementing the provisions of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state and local statutes as well as policies and procedures that stipulate a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for all students with disabilities. Special education administrators have played a critical role in the evolution of the field.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

States vary widely in how they endorse and certify (or avoid endorsing or certifying) special education administrators. The absence of national competencies that define the role of special education administrators for all states makes it difficult to measure administrative shortages in special education administration. The Council of Exceptional Children (CES), in conjunction with the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), is developing national competencies that would be applied to accredit training programs by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

Although the shortage of administrators in general has been widely reported, there has been less attention to the shortage of special education administrators. This paper details available statistics. The present number of vacancies and unfilled positions indicates that school districts are experiencing a shortage of special education administrators and that these numbers may be even greater than current reports suggest.

PREPARATION

Analyzing the preparation of special education administrators involves two factors: (a) availability of pre-service preparation programs, and (b) the content of those programs. While research about the preparation of special education administrators is limited, we have concluded that preparation programs are linked to state certification requirements, there is considerable confusion about preparation and certification requirements, and there are relatively few preparation programs that are oriented specifically to special education administration.

Preparation Program Availability

The paper reviews historical information about programs that train special education administrators. A recent review of the NCPSE'S Database of College and University Programs yielded information from 27 institutions of higher education that provide advanced training in special education administration. Six of these programs were housed in departments of educational administration, nineteen were housed in special education departments, and two were housed in joint arrangements.

Most programs required from two to four courses related directly to special education administration. Courses in the legal principles of special education and in the supervision of

special education were most often mentioned. Programs required two to six courses in educational administration and additional courses in research and content areas. With one exception, all certification and degree-granting programs required an internship.

Preparation Program Content

There has been an erosion in the number of leadership training grants offered to institutions of higher education that has contributed to the decline in the number of training programs and students of special education administration.

Early competencies identified for the successful practice of special education administration included knowledge of the following areas: disabilities in children, school law, general education, vocational education, curriculum and instruction, effective interventions, budgeting, finance, negotiation and conflict resolution, due process, professional development, personnel and program evaluation and supervision, administrative duties, supervisory/consultative duties, service delivery, planning, organization, management, coordination, teacher assistance teams, and family issues around disabilities. Not only must training programs for general education administrators include special education competencies in the knowledge base, but special education administration training must also include general education administration competencies. Special education administrators must also have the competencies needed to provide special education professional development opportunities to their general administration colleagues. It should be noted that the role of the special education administrator has shifted dramatically since its inception, from one where the primary concern was on effective interventions to one where the dominant concern currently is litigation.

Current priorities in the field as indicated by a current U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) grants competition are:

- Understanding and working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations, developing competencies necessary for working with these groups, and infusing those competencies into training programs
- Coursework that emphasizes the participation of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum and practices that improve student outcomes
- Relating research to practice in training programs and coursework
- Preparing special education leaders who can collaborate and foster collaborative environments
- Connecting the quality of services that program graduates provide to the goals and activities of the training program so that training program outcomes are linked to outcomes for children with disabilities in schools
- Aligning training programs with state standards for children in schools.

Standards-Driven Reforms and Special Education Leadership Preparation

Currently, programs that prepare educators are participating in a wide range of standards-driven reform and accountability initiatives. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards have been interlinked and aligned to provide teacher education with a well-integrated set of expectations and outcomes upon which to base their practice. The Council for Exceptional Children's Institutional and Program Requirements are aligned with INTASC, NBPTS, and NCATE Standards to provide

special education teacher educators with expectations and outcomes that are linked to those in general education.

The accrediting organizations cited above have joined together to develop special education administration leadership competencies that emphasize integration of expectations and outcomes. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has joined with NCATE to develop Performance-Based Standards for Special Education Administrators (2001).

The paper reviews the standards developed by these organization in detail. We challenge educators responsible for preparing school leaders to address the needs of all students; they should develop approaches that integrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions from special education, general education, and educational administration. Prospective administrators must be equipped to forge new designs for inclusive, diverse, unified schools.

CERTIFICATION AND LICENSURE

Alternate Paths to Certification and Licensure

The quality of certification and licensure requirements has been further compromised by the introduction of alternate paths. These alternate paths to certification and licensure are frequently sponsored by state departments of education in direct competition with the certification and licensure programs offered by institutions of higher education (IHE). There is a great need for research to assess the efficacy of such programs by determining the effect on the delivery of services to students with disabilities and the retention of special education personnel.

State Professional Development Provisions for Special Education Administrators

Compared to research on teaching improvement, very few research topics are directed toward improving administrator skills. While improving personnel skills is important, it is equally important for administrators to reflect on tasks that are germane to the actual administration and management of the programs for which they provide leadership.

SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION WORK FORCE

Retaining certified and qualified personnel in special education is the ultimate challenge for special education administrators. Their roles in supporting and developing the special education work force involve the recruitment, retention, and professional development of special education teachers and related services professionals. Clearly, recruiting additional teachers, developing their skills as special educators, and working to keep them in the field should be high priorities for special education administrators.

Our review of the literature regarding special education administrators' roles in supporting and developing the special education work force indicates that *administrative support* is critical to retaining special educators and improving their abilities to have a positive effect on outcomes for students with disabilities.

Vision and Communication

Studies on teacher dissatisfaction in special education point out special educators feel the need to know the purposes and directions of the special education program, want to have a voice in the decisions that affect their work, and want to know that their perspectives are listened to and respected.

Resources and Paper Work

Special education administrators can play an important role in utilizing technology and organizing work to reduce the burden that paper work and resource shortages present to special educators. To do this effectively, their decision making must be driven by teaching and learning and the needs of students rather than focusing solely on compliance with regulatory demands.

Professional Development

Teachers often cite their need for professional development. The number of new and uncertified teachers entering the field indicates that education, training, and professional socialization are important needs for special education teachers. All of these concerns point to the importance of a well-developed, systematic approach to professional development.

Principals

Our review of the literature indicates that principals' support for the work of special education teachers is critical to the recruitment and retention of special educators. District-level special education administrators need to prepare school-level administrators to understand the roles and responsibilities of special educators.

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION AT A CROSSROADS

The shortage of administrators is well-documented, and the shortage of special education teachers exacerbates the shortage of special education administrators. The preparation and licensure of special education administrators has not received sufficient attention in the past ten years. One avenue of research could determine: (a) the qualifications of persons who have filled special education administration positions, (b) how or whether they became certified, and (c) their preparation for the positions. Further research is needed to address how administrators can facilitate collaboration and how they will be prepared to foster collaborative environments where teachers work toward curriculum access for all students. Some research that gives administrators and boards guidance about what they can do to recruit and retain quality special education teachers and related service professionals is available.

Special education administration is located where special education, general education, and educational administration come together. Historically, the knowledge traditions and practices of special education have dominated the discourse in special education administration. The ascendance of outcome accountability measures for all students has highlighted the necessity to apply all curricular, instructional, and assessment tools from both general and special education to the education of all students. As a result, special education administration has come to a crossroads as a practice. Special education and general education leaders will be challenged to join together to solve the problems of practice inherent in a diverse, complex, high-stakes educational environment.