

## School Leadership and Special Education

### What Principals Should Know

#### IN THIS WATCH

How will nationwide shortages of qualified building principals affect special education programs?

**R**ecruitment and retention of qualified and certified principals are among the greatest challenges confronting school districts. A national survey conducted in 2000 found that nearly half of urban, rural, and suburban school districts report shortages of interested candidates for principal positions, even though the number of individuals holding administrative licenses or endorsements exceeds the number of vacancies each year. If U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predictions hold true, the need for school administrators will increase by as much as 20 percent by 2005.

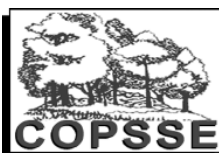
To address shortages, some school districts have employed uncertified individuals, or employed candidates who come from outside education (e.g., industry, the military). Some states have instituted fast-track alternative certification routes. While these responses have filled administrative openings, too often these new principals have little or no formal preparation and/or school-based experience.

The shortage of qualified building principals affects everyone, but there are particular implications for the delivery of special education. The most significant concerns center on the following areas of competency:

- **Do principals understand special education?** The principal's role is pivotal in ensuring that students with disabilities participate in standards-based reform efforts. It can be difficult for individuals with little or no prior experience to understand and appreciate the diverse needs of learners. Even those principals who have prior school experience may not have an adequate understanding of how to plan, coordinate, and deliver services to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- **Are principals prepared to support special education personnel?** The potential exists for unqualified principals to exacerbate the current nationwide shortage of special educators. It is estimated that as many as half of all new special educators leave the field within the first three years as a result of issues related to school leadership—inadequate administrative support, insufficient preparation, complex job responsibilities, and overwhelming paperwork requirements.

At a time when principals must address increased job complexity, rising standards, and greater demands for accountability, they also are being asked to take

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on additional responsibilities related to special education. What is the principal's role as it relates to special education? What do principals need to know about special education? Read on to gain insights from the research.

**Did You Know That the Principal's Role Is Critical to Ensuring That Students with Disabilities Achieve High Standards?**

Specific duties associated with the special education process vary from district to district. Typically, principals are responsible for communicating with families and teachers about special education services, promoting disability awareness, monitoring and evaluating special education decisions and services, and ensuring legal compliance. Federal laws such as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) have expanded principals' roles to include leadership related to, among other things, ensuring that students with disabilities have appropriate access to the general education curriculum, receive effective instructional support, and

affects the extent to which teachers and specialists develop and implement interventions designed to improve student performance. Principals may enhance outcomes for students with disabilities by demonstrating administrative support for special education in the following ways:

- Focusing attention on instructional issues that result in the success of *all* students.
- Fostering a school culture that values inclusion.
- Facilitating the development of appropriate student placements and specialist assignments.
- Providing quality professional development for teachers.
- Ensuring that policies and procedures support collaboration.
- Fostering family participation.
- Making resources available.
- Offering opportunities for special education personnel to share leadership.

**Did You Know That Knowledge of Special Education May Enhance a Principal's Leadership Capacity?**

Principals identify getting help and information about implementing special education programs as their greatest needs. This is not surprising, given that most principals lack the necessary coursework and field experience to create learning environments that emphasize academic success for students with disabilities.

Principals should have knowledge and skills that enable them to perform special education leadership tasks. Examples include:

- The relationship between principal leadership and special

education, especially as it relates to student achievement and teacher attrition.

- Unique learning and behavioral challenges of children with disabilities.
- Laws that protect the educational rights of students with disabilities, especially IDEA and NCLB.
- Professional support needs of instructional personnel (e.g., manageable caseload responsibilities, opportunities to collaborate, etc.).
- Elements of inclusive schools.

**For More Information**

Information reported in this brief was based on the COP SSE issue brief, *Principals and Special Education: The Critical Role of School Leaders*, prepared by Michael F. DiPaola and Chris Walther-Thomas. This document can be found on the COP SSE web site at [www.copsse.org](http://www.copsse.org).

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The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium has developed unified standards and a professional development process for principals. Effective student learning for all students is the primary focus.

demonstrate their progress through participation in large-scale assessment efforts.

The importance of effective instructional leadership as it relates to supporting special education personnel is well documented. Administrative support

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