

Serving All Students: Assuring Principals Access to Standards Based Professional Development

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Abstract

School districts often face challenges in recruiting and retaining high quality and fully credentialed leaders who have the knowledge and skills to serve all students, particularly students with disabilities. These challenges are exacerbated by today's accountability climate which calls for an increased focus on performance expectations for school principals. Research indicates school principals must have access to research-based professional development that enhances their knowledge and skills for effective implementation of policies and procedures to provide all students with access to the general education curriculum to meet increasingly rigorous state standards (e.g., Authors 2017). The purpose of this study was to determine if school principals were receptive to the use of online professional development modules designed to improve their knowledge of special education and inclusive practices to effectively implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). After completion of the online modules, principals in a large, urban school district in the southeast United States participated in a survey to determine their perception of the impact of the content of the modules on their ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Keywords: Principals, Special Education, Inclusion, Professional Development

Introduction

Advancing the Special Education Knowledge of Principals

An emphasis on accountability has required a focus on professional development opportunities for administrators that is responsive to the complexity of school leadership. Increasingly, school principals are required to do more to improve school performance and increase student outcomes yet are provided with limited resources and personnel to accomplish the task. As school demographics continue to change and more students with disabilities are educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), school principals need access to professional development that enhances their knowledge and skills to ensure that all students are supported to maximize their potential. School principals not only need to provide guidance and leadership in general education programming, but also be able to effectively lead special education programming (Templeton, 2017).

The focus on principals in school reform movements stems from their ability to create a culture that supports student achievement across a continuum of diverse learning platforms. Special education leadership preparation ultimately makes a significant difference in the services and supports received by students with disabilities (Smith et al., 2010). School principals must have the special education knowledge necessary to provide adequate supports for special education teachers who work in inclusive settings (Templeton, 2017). For a significant number of principals working in today's schools, their roles have changed from one of advocacy to compliance monitor and even legal counsel (Boscardin, 2004; Boscardin & Lashley, 2019). Principals assume increased responsibility for the direct provision of services for students with disabilities while local education agency (LEA) administrators accepted a broader scope of diverse responsibilities to create the conditions which will allow principals, teachers, and other school professionals to improve outcomes for all students.

As Voltz and Collins (2010) contended,

“Special education administrators play a critical role in the implementation of successful inclusion in diverse, standards-based environments. They provide the vision and leadership necessary to guide educators in both general and special education as they deliver instructional programs to meet the needs of diverse students with disabilities” (p. 70).

This statement continues to be of great importance one decade later. However, school principals are rarely provided with the necessary time for professional development that allows them to better lead the schools they serve. Darling-Hammond (1996; 1997) and Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002) consistently emphasized the importance of high-quality teachers as well as high-quality school leaders. Today's school leaders working in high-need districts face extraordinary challenges with the changing demographics (Author et al., 2016). In this era of accountability systems, the stakes are often higher for success when the principals, students, and families reside in a large urban school district. Urban settings face increased challenges associated with high rate of poverty, diverse student populations, and large numbers of English learners (EL).

A Bridge to School Reform, a report from the Wallace Foundation (2007), stated that leadership was essential to ensuring that all students received an appropriate education that would lead to their success as citizens post K-12 graduation. Indeed, education leadership has been called the “bridge” that can bring together the many different reform efforts in ways that practically nothing else can” (Bryk et al., 2009, p. 2). A tremendous need exists to provide the knowledge and skills required of school leaders as they work to include all children in the public-school setting. When we consider the numerous issues facing students and administrators in urban settings serving highly vulnerable populations due to the issues of poverty, hunger, and homelessness, the needs in large urban districts are greater than can be imagined (Thornburg & Mungai, 2016).

Author and colleagues (2016) affirmed that “[t]he range and complexity of issues facing urban school leaders are particularly daunting” (p. 315). Of nearly 16,000 school districts in the United States, it is estimated that 3 percent of urban school leaders educate almost 45 percent of the students in the country (Dalton et al., 2006; Author et al., 2016; Sadovnik, 2008). The model of school district and school leaders being heroes who work alone has evolved to a model of a collective vision for the 21st century learning (Crockett, 2018; Hansen, 2009) in which collaboration and teamwork across all levels are valued. Although a 21st Century model provides a clearer vision of the knowledge, skills, and expertise essential for today's Pre-Kindergarten (PK)-12 students of all abilities, the need to recognize the significance of preparing school administrators with essential competencies in serving students with unique abilities remains. Effective and relevant preparation in special education for school administrators allows principals to lead schools and programs to meet the diverse learning needs of students who must obtain 21st century skills to be college and career ready.

Although all school leaders play a role in serving students with disabilities, special education administrators assume the critical role in providing a continuum of service delivery matched specifically to the identified needs of students with disabilities and their families. Yet, “school leadership preparation programs often lack content pertaining to the knowledge necessary to assure quality programs for students with disabilities” (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 94). Special education knowledge, skills, and competencies are key elements in achieving success (Author, 2014). Additionally, many school districts and universities still debate the best format to deliver professional development programs that produce highly effective, knowledgeable, and collaborative personnel to meet the needs of serving all students in urban school districts.

Educating students with disabilities is challenging for many school principals, especially when they have not had the opportunity to participate in special education professional development as part of their leadership preparation programs. When students are not successful, especially students with disabilities, school leaders must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to adequately and appropriately address the situation (Author #5, 2010). According to the Education Leadership Policy Standards by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (2008), “dramatic changes have put education leadership at the forefront of education policy research and debate” (p.3).

Determining Required Knowledge Needs of School Principals

Successful leadership is the key when new laws such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) emphasize principal accountability (Roberts & Gierra, 2017). And, although the focus on accountability of principals to serve all students continues to increase, personnel preparation remains fairly stagnant. Targeted professional development of principals is critical as the number of students in special education programs, students speaking other languages, and student demographics continue to transform the needs of our schools. In the state of Florida, special education administrators are in high demand, yet administrators comprised only 3.6 percent of school personnel (Florida Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, the state of Florida does not have a specific special education administration certification which often means that students with disabilities and their families are served by school leaders who did not possess the knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement policies and procedures aligned with their unique needs. This is concerning given there are over 414,000 students with disabilities in Florida (FLDOE, 2020) which is roughly 14.4 percent of the student population, a higher concentration than the national 12.9 percent (USDOE, 2019). These statistics disproportionately impact urban districts where the concentration of students with disabilities is higher.

In an effort to provide school administrators with the specific content needed to meet the needs of students with disabilities, a study was conducted in a large, urban school district located in the Southeast of the United States. With over 25,000 employees, including 772 school administrators, delivering consistent professional development expeditiously and effectively remains a challenge. As of 2019, the number of students with disabilities in the district exceeded 22,000, making it imperative that administrators participate in professional development that is directly relevant to their roles and responsibilities related to special education.

At the request of the Office of Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Department in the school district, Authors (2015) conducted a survey-based study to assess the knowledge and skills related to special education services by school principals. This study utilized a survey aligned with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2009) standards for administrators. The survey entitled, Needs Assessment on Knowledge and Skills for Teaching Children with Disabilities (NAKSTCD), measured 10 aspects of special education knowledge and skills and included 31 Likert scale questions ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The survey was completed by 289 school principals working in the district.

A significant finding of the study was principals voiced key differences in their specific professional development areas that would assist them in implementing inclusive programs. In general, the researchers found that principals required additional training to effectively meet the needs of their schools and students. Specifically, some principals expressed needs in the areas of: Quality Instruction and Program Development, Mutual Support, and Appropriate Education for Students with Disabilities while some principals expressed a greater need for knowledge development in Communication, Laws and Policies, and Educational Curriculum and Model. This study extended the much needed research base on the knowledge required to enable school principals to fully implement IDEA (2004). Additionally, the survey data provided the knowledge topics determined by the respondents to be most necessary for further professional development.

The information gathered from the survey administered by Authors (2015) was used to develop online learning modules that were informed by CEC standards, grounded in best instructional practices, and offered in an asynchronous fashion. In this way, the professional development program was targeted and developed to address the critical gap in school principals’ knowledge and skills related to special education and inclusive practices.

Creating Targeted On-Line Professional Development Modules

The knowledge necessary to effectively address diverse needs cannot be attained by one-shot professional development workshops or through disconnected training that does not require application of learned skills. Instead, a collaborative process of systematic course development, implementation and evaluation of research-based practices, practically grounded inquiry, and continuous improvement are necessary (Author et al., 2014). Authors (2015) addressed the need to close a critical gap between the traditional preparation of urban special education administrators and the skills, knowledge, and competencies required for full implementation of IDEA (2004). To address the gap, online professional development modules were created through a collaborative approach between a large, southeastern university and a large, urban school district.

Wright and deCosta (2016) stated, “the leadership of the principal is critical in the development and maintenance of effective schools and underscore the importance of professional development for principals, there is ambiguity surrounding approaches which successfully meet the professional development needs and preferences of school principals” (p. 29). Although studies have conflicting definitions of leadership (Yukl, 2002; Barth, 1986), the purpose of this study was to understand what principals believe they needed to know in order to best serve all students. Wanzare and da Costa (2005) stated that when providing professional development opportunities to principals, needs of adult learners must be met. Given that time, or the lack thereof, was a critical factor for most school principals, we reviewed possible delivery platforms available to the school district to determine which would work best for the majority of principals. Many 21st Century educators agree that time, cost, and quality can vary with the use of online modules. However, the use of online, asynchronous training modules can be of great benefit to busy school leaders (Davis, 2016). Stone-MacDonald and Douglas (2015) found that “[o]nline and technology mediated learning can create sustainable education and development opportunities” (p. 241). Realizing the time for face-to-face interaction was not optimal for the principals involved, the use of online modules for delivery of content was considered. Considering the need to work within the framework of a large urban school district and the resources available to provide professional development to increase the knowledge the principals requested, a decision was made to use online modules as the content delivery format.

Developing Online Modules for Use Anytime and Anywhere

With the need for professional development established through the principals’ survey, the next step taken was to create online content modules directly aligned with the findings. Seven modules were initially prepared for principal training. The modules were reviewed and edited by members of the district Professional Development Office and ESE Department. Eight parents of students with disabilities in the district were provided with the opportunity to preview and comment on the modules during early stages of creation and provided valuable feedback from a parent’s perspective. Six of the parents were members of the district’s ESE Parent Support Team which serves as a parent resource for the district, and two parents were actively involved in conversations with the district and schoolboard about increased parent engagement. The module titles and their main ideas included a variety of topics gleaned from the needs assessment in areas ranging from compliance and instructional strategies to family engagement. Each module contained an online survey to be completed at the end of the course to receive a certificate of completion. Beyond the valuable access to professional development opportunities at their fingertips, the online modules provided a platform for district personnel to meet the state’s re-certification requirements enabling them to remain a certified in the state.

The modules were introduced to school principals from the Superintendent’s office in collaboration with the district’s Exceptional Student Department (ESE). As a mandatory requirement, all school principals were provided with an overview of the requirements to complete the modules, including deadlines for completion. Direct, individual assistance and support were provided to principals by district level personnel in the event they encountered access or technical issues. Over the course of several months, the district’s ESE department monitored and tracked the completion of the modules. Principals were sent routine reminders of the completion timeline and received automated emails and certificates upon completion. This practice has been sustained beyond this study. Upon being hired to their principalship, principals are required to take the Administrator Professional Development Modules for Exceptional Student Education (ESE) as a condition of employment and leadership. Of the 14 total modules, the first 7 were designed to meet the specific needs of school principals. At the time of this study, the first 7 modules were completed by 188 school principals. Online modules were hosted on the district’s Professional Development Services Online System, PDSOnline. PDSOnline is an online learning

mastery system that allows educators to access learning modules at their convenience from anywhere they have internet access. Upon completion, administrators were able to satisfy district required in-service points. Additionally, the completion of select modules could be used to satisfy credit hours towards the State’s ESE recertification requirement. The state requires 20 in-service points specific to teaching students with disabilities for anyone holding a state certificate as a part of the renewal process.

Module Content

The first seven modules were created specifically to address the needs of school principals. These online modules were aligned with professional learning goals (Author et al., 2015). Table 1 provides the names of each of the first seven modules and a condensed description of the content based on associated learning goals. The online modules included PowerPoint presentations, video profiles and scenarios, tutorials, activities, and quizzes which were embedded and had to be completed to progress through the module. Each module took approximately 15 minutes to an hour to complete, depending on the topic.

Table 1: Online Professional Development Module Titles and Content

Module	Title	Content Description
Module 1	IDEA and Legal Requirements	Legislation including IDEA and Section 504 ESE Compliance Dispute Resolution
Module 2	Providing Specialized Instruction and Related Services	Administrator’s role in assuring full implementation of specialized instruction and related services
Module 3	Monitoring Academic Achievement	Administrator’s role as it relates to monitoring student achievement in ESE PreK-12
Module 4	Transition from Elementary through Post-Secondary	Preschool Disabilities Program Preschool Eligibility, Support, and Transition Federal requirements for planning transition Transition Individualized Education Plan (TIEP)
Module 5	Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities and their Families	Strategies to increase parental involvement
Module 6	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973	Responsibilities aligned with identification, evaluation, and providing services
Module 7	Building Inclusive Schools	Benefits and elements of effective of inclusion Administrator’s role in inclusive practices Service delivery options and models Significance of collaboration

Principal Satisfaction with Online Modules

As a part of the final step to complete the modules and in order to receive their certificate of completion, each principal was required to complete a 5-point Likert style questionnaire to indicate their satisfaction with the modules. Additionally, upon completion of the modules first full year of implementation and approximately six months after completion, all principals were asked to take a survey to indicate what they learned as well as the impact of the professional development on their practice. Ratings from the results of the end of module survey were compiled and are identified in Table 2. At the time of this study, 188 school principals completed the modules and participated in the questionnaire for a 100% response rate.

Table 2: ESE Principal's Questionnaire Results

	Extremely Satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Not sure if I will be able to use	Dissatisfied	Waste of time
Overall impression of the course	98	85	2	2	1
The course increased my knowledge	71	103	11	2	1
I will use what I have learned	119	56	11	0	0
I would recommend the course to others	84	70	24	3	2

The post-module questionnaire included five true/false statements related to the implementation of information gleaned from the modules. The following are the results of the agree or disagree questions:

45% of principals agreed: When faced with a situation regarding an ESE student, I have referred to information in the ESE Administrator's module for guidance or assistance.

55% of principals agreed: I have implemented a practice or strategy with my staff that I specifically learned in the ESE Administrator's modules.

87% of principals agreed: The ESE Administrator's module helped me understand more about my specific role and responsibilities as an administrator when meeting the needs of students with disabilities and gifted learners.

71% of principals agreed: After completing the ESE Administrator's modules I have paid closer attention to the needs of ESE students, including responding to and working with their parents or guardians.

67% of principals agreed: The ESE Administrator's modules provided me with information related to ESE students that I have not been exposed to previously.

Results and Discussion

The vision to create professional development for principals that would enable school leaders to have the knowledge needed to provide best practices when working with students with disabilities was achieved. A survey was conducted to determine what knowledge and skills principals needed to serve students with disabilities in a large urban school district. This study exposes the significance of improving principal's access to professional development in the area of special education. Of the 188 school principals surveyed, an overwhelming majority (71 percent) agreed that the online modules increased their knowledge of special education, and 93 percent stated they would apply what they learned in the modules to their practice. Further, 97 percent of school principals were either extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the modules. User satisfaction for the online modules will continue to be collected. Feedback will be used to evaluate and enhance the modules.

Given the impact of the first seven modules on principal professional practice, the online modules have been extended and an additional seven modules have been added. The additional online modules are tailored to various

stakeholders including teachers, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, school staff, and parents. Since 2012, over 16,600 participants including administrators, teachers, parents, and non-instructional staff have completed the online modules. As schools move to become strong inclusive settings, information must be provided to all stakeholders to lead to a more intense focus on student achievement and improved leadership and engagement in serving students with disabilities.

What's Next? Continued Studies and Implications

The school district is working in partnership with the state's Department of Education to review the possibility of all school districts in the state (67) using the online professional development modules. The survey results across participants will continue to be collected and analyzed to further develop and enhance the online modules to expand learning opportunities for all personnel who serve students with disabilities in their schools. Additional long-term data collection is in process to measure impact of the professional development on school activities such as referral to exceptional education programs, student suspensions, and individual education plans.

Few states require principals or administrators to have training in special education or require minimal training (Steinbrecher et al., 2015). According to Templeton (2017), "[p]rincipals who are knowledgeable and skilled in special education tended to be more engaged in the educational process for students with disabilities" (p. 25) and placed "a higher value on pre-referral interventions and instructional strategies" (p. 28). The current study results illustrated the critical need for principals to gain knowledge related to evidence-based practices to improve student outcomes by improving their own perceptions (Praisner, 2003; Templeton, 2017). Further studies are needed to explore the impact of professional learning provided to school principals on their leadership and inclusive school practices. Additionally, studies are needed to determine principal's knowledge gain and the impact that gain might have on the modification of policies and procedures to better serve students with disabilities in schools.

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