

2004

The Use And Evaluation Of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups As Reported By Public School Principals And Special Education Directors In Four New Jersey Counties: Bergen, Essex, Morris And Passaic

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THE USE AND EVALUATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT
ADVOCACY GROUPS AS REPORTED BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND
SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS IN FOUR NEW JERSEY COUNTIES:
BERGEN, ESSEX, MORRIS, AND PASSAIC

BY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Education
Seton Hall University
2004

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GROUPS AS REPORTED BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND SPECIAL
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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore, through a survey instrument, the perceived role of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups (SEPAG) in meeting the needs of public school special education students. The study wished to gather information regarding the *use* of these groups in assisting administrators in planning educational programs for special needs students in public schools. The study also explored *administrative education levels* and the *principal or special education director positions* that may impact on the understanding of special education law in order to implement policies that promote successful special education programs. One hundred-two special education directors and 316 principals in the New Jersey counties of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic were randomly selected from school districts whose superintendents granted permission to conduct the research. These counties were selected due to the diversity of District Factor Groupings available: high to low: A – J socio-economic districts. There were 121 respondents. To date there has been little investigation into the use of, or the impact of advocacy groups upon special education policy and programs.

The study employed various statistical analyses including descriptive statistics and general linear model univariate analysis (two-way ANOVA). The results of the study suggested that administrators' use of SEPAG strongly influenced their evaluations

of these groups as special education advocates and reliable sources for current information regarding special education laws and issues. Administrators, who kept abreast of the activities of SEPAG, appeared more confident in their abilities to communicate and to establish a collaborative, trusting environment with district parents of special needs children.

Additionally, the research suggested that the more educated and the more concerned administrators were about special education issues, the more mistrustful they were of these groups. Administrators' responses also acknowledged and used SEPAG as one of their resources in mediating appropriate special education services and programs.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of the principals and special education directors who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in this research. Intellectual fervor and collegiality are alive and well in the northern New Jersey counties of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic. I would also like to acknowledge the members of my committee for their encouragement and support:

Dr. Elaine Walker, my mentor, whose persistent prodding resulted in a clearer and more cogent defense and final document.

Dr. Angela Raimo, my second reader, whose respect for the wisdom of the law inspired my study and understanding of the need to deliver effective, compliant special education programs.

Dr. Catherine Duncan, who taught me to lead with kindness and to serve with dignity.

Dr. Marianna Marchese, a valued colleague and life-long friend, whose encouragement will always be remembered.

A special thank you to Dr. Alan Hodes whose life's work with special education students and parents gave invaluable insight to my findings.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to:

My husband, Joe

My daughter, Kerry

My daughter, Erin

My family

And my colleagues, students, and friends

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In 1975, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required schools to make available to all children with disabilities a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment suitable to their individual needs. IDEA requires that school districts develop appropriate Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for each special needs youngster. The educational plan and services outlined in the IEP document address the specific needs of each child.

In addition, according to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, no qualified individual with a disability in the United States will be excluded from, denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or action that receives money from the Federal government. This includes public schools that must provide “reasonable accommodations” to students with disabilities. According to LaMorte (2002), reasonable accommodations to facilitate participation may include provisions or construction for equal access to facilities, provisions or equipment for effective communication to persons with hearing or vision disabilities, and reasonable modifications in academic requirements or working conditions.

Since the passing of these laws, special need students who were often confined to special schools and institutions have made significant academic, social, and emotional gains in public school settings alongside their non-disabled peers. According

to Hehir (2003), educating children with special needs in regular education schools has proven positive for special needs students and has supported societal goals of “integration for people with disabilities, as children learn that disability is a natural element of human diversity” (p. 36). IDEA and Section 504 have championed the rights of the special needs population in the twenty plus years since the passage of these laws.

However, Wrightslaw (2002) explains that despite federal laws designed to help children with special needs in the public schools, parents of special needs youngsters and administrators of special education programs can become overwhelmed by the increasing complexities of special education laws. Administrators can also become concerned about securing related services under IDEA and Section 504 in light of the increasing costs of implementing these services and dwindling district revenues. Indeed, LaMorte (2002) posed the question, “Are the costs of special education programs justified by the benefits” (p. 332)?

Patterson, Bowling and Marshall (2000) have suggested that there is a need for administrators to become more educated to the nuances of special education laws in order to avoid conflict between the district and parents of special needs youngsters. Administrators need to explore creative ways to pay for increasingly expensive mandated special education programs that have never been fully funded by the federal government. Currently, according to Wrightslaw (2003), Republicans and Democrats alike say they “embrace the goal of fully financing special education by 2009, but Republicans say they would like the federal contribution to be discretionary while the Democrats contend it should be mandatory” (p. 4).

Richards (2002) has noted when parents are confronted with educational and legal jargon in IEP meetings, emotions dominate. When this occurs, parents and administrators may be unable to clearly communicate their concerns and agree upon reasonable accommodations and modifications. Tension may dominate IEP meetings. Richards further stated that "building good working relationships and trust with parents of special education students is important to avoiding potential lawsuits" (p.1).

Malechuk (2003) reported that principals need an ongoing, in-depth understanding of the intent of special education laws in order to address implementation challenges. Additionally, according to Johnson (2003):

the parents' perception of the principal's commitment to meeting the requirements of the law is often the deciding factor for parents who are weighing the pros and cons of pursuing legal action against the district. (p. 3)

Furthermore, other researchers have suggested that principals and special education administrators must understand special education laws, and they must also work to become skilled in the art of mediation in order to clearly articulate the goals of the IEP meeting to facilitate a least restrictive educational milieu for the special needs children. Bollero (2002) cited the use of mediation principles as integral to sustaining relationships and keeping focused on the child's needs and not the district's resources or the parents' expectations. Bar-Lev, Neustadt, and Peter (2002) stated that mediation improves relationships and is less adversarial since it encourages all parties to look for more creative solutions to accommodate students' needs and to avoid confrontational and expensive due process hearings.

Nevertheless, since confusion on the part of administrators and parents over what the law provides, has in many instances, created hostility between parties in IEP meetings, some parents have sought out-of-district support. Sometimes attorneys are engaged or parents pursue advice from the increasing numbers of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups (SEPAG). SEPAG provide detailed explanations of the law and suggestions to parents regarding ways to proceed when they are dissatisfied with the district's recommendations. Some advocacy groups appear neutral, but some advocacy groups appear more adversarial and suggest that parents engage in litigation to acquire the appropriate services they desire for their special needs youngster. Byrh and Schneider, as cited in Gerwertz (2002) stated that significant student gains will not be realized "without trusting relationships among teachers, principals and parents, and students" (p. 1).

Problem Statement

When parents go out-of-district to garner information and support for their child's education needs, it is clear that the lines of communication and the level of trust between them and the school district have eroded. Naturally, mending these fences is in the best interest of special needs youngsters, their parents, and school administrators. Litigation is expensive and time consuming and better avoided, unless the parents make unrealistic demands.

When administrators lack understanding and empathy for the needs of special education students and the complexities of special education laws, policies, and procedures, there is a need for further education to increase the existing knowledge base

and to expand leadership and managerial skills. Administrators, who must implement special education programs, need to keep abreast of special education laws, available related services, and funding issues. In addition to participating in on-going professional courses and seminars in this field, administrators might also benefit from using the resources of SEPAG that parents have found informative and useful.

Thus, a study to explore and to evaluate the usefulness of SEPAG to public school administrators in implementing special education programs is an important area for research. Administrators who participate will have the opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of SEPAG and to review their own preparation for addressing the concerns of special education parents. Given the complexities of the federal laws that guarantee a free and appropriate education to all children in the nation's public schools, their participation might prove beneficial.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the present study was to explore, through a survey technique, administrators' evaluations of the role of SEPAG in helping administrators and parents to meet the needs of special education students. Additionally, the study wished to gather information regarding the current use of these groups by administrators to assist them in planning education programs for special needs students in public schools in four northern New Jersey counties. The relations between levels of administrative education and position and the administrator's ability to understand special education law and to implement policies that promote effective special education programs were explored. Initially, the research also attempted to examine the impact of administrative gender and

District Factor Grouping (DFG) on the use of SEPAG. However, neither variable proved statistically significant. Therefore, they were excluded from the findings.

The results of the study were used to determine whether administrators used SEPAG. The results of the study also were used to determine whether administrators found SEPAG to be helpful in clarifying and interpreting the legal rights guaranteed to students under IDEA and Statute 504. Furthermore, this study was additionally used to explore the administrators' perspectives of their educational preparation and the administrative skills deemed essential to understanding and implementing special education law and inclusive practices.

Method

The research was conducted through the use of a questionnaire mailed to and completed by a random sampling of suburban and urban special education administrators and principals in public elementary schools in four counties in New Jersey to include Bergen, Essex, Morris and Passaic. A review of literature provided by on-line SEPAG was also included to describe SEPAG's stated purposes and functions.

Research Questions

The following three overarching questions were asked in this study:

Research Question Number 1: Are Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups used by principals and special education administrators in the four counties surveyed?

1a. Does an administrator's district location impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

1b. Does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

1c. Does an administrator's position impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

Research Null Hypothesis 1: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's district location, position, and level of education and the reported usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in the four counties surveyed.

Research Question Number 2: How helpful is the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students as reported by administrators?

2a. How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs?

2b. How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs?

Research Null Hypothesis 2: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's level of education and position and an administrator's evaluation of the helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups.

Research Question Number 3: What concerns do administrators have regarding the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students and their ability to assist administrators in implement-

ing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

3a. How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's level of concern regarding Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

3b. How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's level of concern regarding Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

Research Null Hypothesis 3: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's level of education and position and an administrator's level of concern regarding the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters.

Significance of the Research for Educational Practice

According to Johnson (2003) "...special education litigation is not on the wane" (p. 16). If parents lose confidence in their local school districts' ability and willingness to provide for the educational needs of their youngsters, they may opt to go out-of-district for legal advice and support from advocacy groups. When this occurs, there is the possibility that unnecessary, expensive litigation may ensue for both parents and administrators. Some SEPAG are underwritten by lawyers and strongly recommend the advice of legal counsel. Wrightslaw (2002) and Reed Martin (2002) are two examples of advocacy groups underwritten by attorneys Pete Wrightslaw and Reed Martin.

Concomitantly, some administrators are justifiably concerned about the rising costs of special education programs. Overturf, in Hertzner (2002), explained that “only public schools have a responsibility to provide services to people with disabilities with no regard to what those services might cost” (p. 2). Additionally, Zirkel, as cited in Bivins (2002), suggested that “... the whole process has become so cumbersome, complicated and costly that we often lose sight of the original quest, which is, what is an appropriate education for these kids” (p. 2)?

Administrators may also have limited knowledge and understanding of special education law and related services. As a result, this lack of expertise according to Malechuk (2002) causes administrators to make uninformed decisions in their districts regarding student assessment, placement, and service delivery. When communication breaks down as parents decide to pursue alternative venues of redress, time may be taken away from the primary focus of planning and implementing intervention and remedial strategies for the youngster at risk.

Therefore, this research is significant for educational practice. By inviting administrators to indicate their use of SEPAG and to evaluate the usefulness of SEPAG, the study hoped to encourage administrators as follows:

1. To reflect upon the administrator’s understandings of the intent and language of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504.
2. To examine the administrator’s capacity to conduct IEP meetings that foster clear communication, build trust, and avoid confrontation and due process hearings.

3. To redefine the administrators' roles as child advocates who agree to develop within their districts optimal environments to foster learning for youngsters with special needs.

Significance of Research for Advancing Knowledge

This study is significant for advancing knowledge and understanding of the level of professional training principals and special education administrators might be involved in, to ensure that they have a command of mandated special education laws and are in compliance of these laws when they conduct IEP meetings.

In addition, some SEPAG mission statements affirm their intent to effect educational policy at many levels. It behooves the public school educational community to understand the power of such influence and to take advantage of advocacy research and resources to add to the district's own knowledge base. Subsequently, the district may work to advance the development of educational policy both locally within the district and at the State and federal levels in the important area of special education.

Limitations of the Study

Lang and Hass (1970) suggest that in any research project there are limitations. In the research there were a number that will be considered particularly with regard to the use of a survey instrument. They cautioned that since the reliability of the responses cannot be checked, honesty of replies may or may not be a valid assumption. Additionally, the assumption that the invited participants completed the survey is not guaranteed. There was also no control over when the survey was completed. If taken in

a hurried time frame, results will vary from the survey taken in a careful study-type manner.

Additionally, the sample of responses was limited to four surveyed New Jersey counties (Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic). The external validity of the results cannot be generalized to other areas of the nation or rural groups. Furthermore, the external validity of the demographic data was limited to principals and special education directors. The results may not reflect the views of parents, teachers, superintendents, and federal legislative and administrative personnel.

Delimitations of the Study

The districts of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic were chosen since there was an adequate sampling of lower socio-economic to upper socio-economic A-J districts in these northern counties. Since one of the variables initially examined (but later excluded due to lack of any significant findings) was socio-economic status, or District Factor Grouping (DFG), as it impacts the evaluations and use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, it was necessary to focus on districts that included A-J groupings. In the southern part of the state there are few if any affluent J districts. Zirkel (2002) suggested that the preponderance of special education lawsuits are clustered in the northern, more affluent metropolitan area of New Jersey which includes the counties selected for this research.

Definitions of Terms

This list of key terms is not exhaustive to special education. It merely represents the terms germane to the present study drawn from relevant literature.

Accommodations: These are supports and/or services provided to help a student access the general curriculum and validly demonstrate learning. Retrieved May 13, 2002 from <http://www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/resources/glossary.html>

Autistic: According to the New Jersey Administrative Code Title 6 A Chapter 14 Special Education (2002), this is a term used to identify “a pervasive developmental disability which significantly impacts verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction that adversely affects a student’s educational performance” (p. 34). Retrieved September 27, 2002 from <http://www.state.nj/isnjded/code/title6a/chap14/>

District Factor Grouping: According to the New Jersey’s Department of Education (2002), school districts in New Jersey are categorized according to a district’s relative wealth or socio-economic status. Using alphabetical groupings for A – J, A districts include those whose property values and relative wealth are among the lowest in the state and J districts are those whose property values and relative wealth are among the highest in the state.

Due Process: According to LaMorte (2002) due process implies that the powers of the government are exercised similarly in similar situations in order to protect individuals’ rights. The Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments prohibit denial of this right when life, liberty, or property is involved. In relation to special education, as defined by the Education Law Center (2002) in The Ed Law Right to Special Education in New Jersey: A Guide for Advocates, a due process hearing “provides a parent an opportunity to not only complain about what the school district has done wrong, but also to correct the district’s action and remedy the harm caused to his or her child” (p. 30).

Free Appropriate Education (FAPE): According to Public Law 94 – 142 (S. 6) (1975) FAPE means special education and related services which:

(a) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge, (b) meet the standards of the State educational agency, (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and (d) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 19. (p. 1)

Inclusion: Inclusion is required under the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to Chapter 14 Special Education New Jersey Administrative Code Title 6 A: 14 - 4.2 (2002) children with disabilities must be educated in regular classrooms unless the “nature and severity of the disability is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (p. 47).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): According to Public Law 94-142 (S. 6); Nov. 29, (1975) an IEP is:

a written statement for each handicapped child developed in a meeting by a representative of the local educational agency or an intermediate educational unit who shall be qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of handicapped children...the IEP includes a statement of present level or performance...annual goals...short-term instructional objectives,... [delineation] of specific services, the projected ...duration of the plan, and the [determination to review] whether instructional

objectives are being achieved. (p. 1)

(<http://www.asclepius.com/angel/special.html> retrieved October 24, 2002

Least Restrictive Environment: To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are to be educated with children who are not disabled. Retrieved May 13, 2002 from <http://www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/resources/glossary.html>

Mainstreaming: According to Shultz-Stout (2001) mainstreaming refers to: the selective placement of special education students in regular education classes generally after a youngster has been receiving instruction in an out of class environment such as a resource room or self-contained special education classroom. It is generally held that when a special education youngster has achieved a certain academic level, he/she would then be eligible for education in a regular education classroom where the student would be expected to advance on a par with the regular education students. (p.1) Retrieved July 17, 2002 from <http://www.weac.org/resource/june96/speced.htm>

Modifications: These are changes made to the content and performance expectations for students. Retrieved May 13, 2002 from <http://www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/resources/glossary.html>

Related Services – Developmental, corrective, and other services required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education services. Retrieved May 13, 2002 from <http://www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/resources/glossary.html>

Special Education: As defined by LaMorte (2002), special education is instruction designed to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.

Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups: As defined by Wrightslaw (2002), Parent Advocacy Groups are groups that work to improve the lives of children with disabilities by using specialized knowledge and expertise to help parents resolve problems with schools.

Specific Learning Disability: According to Public Law 94-142 (S.6) Nov. 29, (1975), a specific learning disability is:

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such disorders include such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexic, and developmental aphasia. Such terms do not include children who have learning problems, which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, of motor handicaps, of general cognitive deficits, of emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (p. 5). Retrieved October 24, 2002 from

<http://www.asclepius.com/angel/special.html>

Transition Service: According to the Renaissance Group (2002), transition services are a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability designed to promote the transition from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation.

Organization of the Chapters

The study was reported in five chapters. The first chapter gave the background for the study, an overview of the research problem, purpose, discussed limitations, delimitations, and defined key terms. The second chapter reviews current literature pertaining to the problem and purpose of the research in order to gain perspective of the three overarching research questions posed. The third chapter presents the methodology, design, variables, instrumentation, descriptions of participants, reliability, data collection, response rate, and statistical methods of analysis. The fourth chapter reports the findings. The fifth chapter summarizes the major findings and recommendations for further research in this important area of special education.

CHAPTER II

Review of Related Literature

In exploring the use of the roles of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in representing the needs of public school special education students, as evaluated by special education administrators, it is beneficial to first reflect upon the history of special education in the United States public schools. In doing so, it is necessary to reference the landmark legal decisions that significantly delineated for administrators and educators exactly how children with special needs should and must, by law, be served in their daily instructional environments. Specifically, Public Law 94 – 142 (S.6) enacted in 1975 and subsequently renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are the most significant legal decisions to impact public school special education and will be addressed at length.

However, it is important to note that prior to the enactment of PL 94 – 142, the responsibility of educating children with disabilities primarily fell to the children's parents. Millions of youngsters in the United States were excluded from public education and were not receiving appropriate educational services. As noted in LaMorte (2002), encouraged by the success of the resulting legislation in *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), that mandated the desegregation of the public schools, advocates championed handicapped children and sought redress through the court system. Numerous cases were filed throughout the country citing the denial of public schooling and due process rights to handicapped youngsters. Two cases in particular led to the landmark decision of 1975. *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v.*

Pennsylvania (1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) resulted in access rights for handicapped youngsters. LaMorte (2002) noted that in *PARC* a federal district court held that:

retarded youngsters between the ages of six and twenty-one should be given access to a free public education and that children with disabilities should be educated in regular education classes whenever possible or in special education classes when necessary. In *Mills*, the doctrine was extended by another federal court to all school – age children with disabilities. (p. 307)

Congress also passed legislation mandating education in public schools for handicapped children under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), (1965) and under Title VI (1966) the amendment to ESEA. In addition, in 1970, Title VI was repealed and replaced by the Education of all Handicapped Children Act (1975) that through its Bureau of Education for the Handicapped brought increased national attention to the rights of disabled students. Although these early laws did not provide for inclusion and a free appropriate education (FAPE), they stand as precursors to the landmark law of 1975 and laid the foundation for the successive entitlements to come under the domain of special education in public schools.

In addition in 1973, Congress passed Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act. This Act is a statute designed to prohibit discrimination and to assure that disabled students have educational opportunities and benefits equal to those provided to non-disabled students.

Interestingly, Hayes (2000) noted that Section 504 was originally intended to address the discrimination that was experienced in the job market by returning

Viet Nam veterans. Encountering difficulties securing employment because of disabilities that could be the result of physical and/or mental impairments, veterans in effect were deemed to be denied their civil rights. According to Hayes (2000), Congress passed legislation to support these adults who were:

Unable to perform a major life activity that the average person in the general population can perform, or significantly restricted as to the condition, manner or duration under which an individual can perform a particular major life activity as compared to...the average person in the general population. (p. 7)

Unable to perform and significantly restricted were terms not defined by the legislature and therefore left open to interpretation. However, major life activities, came to be considered caring for one's self, breathing, walking, seeing, hearing, learning, and working.

Since no age restriction was indicated in the legislation, anyone in the country's population could seek redress under the new 504 legislation where public funds were awarded. This included public schools that receive public funding.

Section 504 then was viewed as a vehicle for handicapped individuals to receive reasonable accommodations to help facilitate their participation in any publicly funded institutions:

No otherwise qualified individual with handicaps in the United States...shall, solely by reason of his or her handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

The reasonable accommodations clause of the 504 statute would guarantee equal access and a "chance to play." It would, nevertheless, not guarantee equal achievement in school settings with a student's peers since 504 was specifically intended to give "access" not "educational benefit" as mandated a few years later under another law, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). In addition, 504 students were to be educated in the regular classroom receiving physical accommodations such as using classroom aides, tape recorders, and using behavioral management techniques.

Public Law 94-142 (S. 6) Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975

In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was passed, replacing the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA). According to Hayes (2002), "Federal funding was then more clearly linked to learning disabled students in public schools" (p. 7). IDEA became the rallying program for administrators who needed to address the issue of students with learning disabilities and special needs. The best thinking of the time was that these students required special separate programs. Naturally, these programs cost money and put additional burdens on school budgets. Federal funding under IDEA would afford public schools the funds to pay for these special programs requiring special educators, additional classroom space, equipment, and materials. Therefore, regardless of the handicap or the disability, the preferred and cost efficient venue for accommodating special needs youngsters was IDEA, which was federally funded, and not 504 which was not federally funded.

Nevertheless, Public Law 94-142 had as its stated purpose to assure that all handicapped children have available to them a free appropriate public education

(FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. To guarantee that an appropriate education was implemented, this law also mandated that an IEP or an Individual Education Plan be written specifying the exact program to be provided for the handicapped youngster.

In 1990, Public Law 94 – 142 was amended by Congress and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Changes in the law at this time included definitions of assistive technology and assistive technology services to be provided by the local school district. In addition, under IDEA Part B, a local school district must provide a FAPE for all children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 years residing within its boundaries. This addition to the law responded to the empirical evidence that acknowledges the need to intervene early to effect academic, social, physical, psychological, and emotional gains for the handicapped youngster. Furthermore, according to LaMorte (2002), the 1990 IDEA included other substantive changes such as provisions for transition services and changes in terminology, including a change from “handicapped children” to “children with disabilities” (p. 306).

Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for services under IDEA (1997) a youngster must meet certain eligibility requirements contained in the eligibility categories in the law. These categories are: mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities. As explained by Cohen as cited in CHADD, 2002) “if a child is identified in one or more of these categories and his

disabling condition adversely affects educational performance, and he requires special services, that child may be eligible to receive special education services and related services under this law” (p. 1). According to LaMorte (2002), the IDEA defines special education as “instruction designed to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability and related services as deemed essential to aid a child with a disability to benefit from special education services” (p. 306).

Identification and Evaluation of Students

Under IDEA, States must identify children with disabilities through “child find.” This provision mandates that “All children with disabilities residing in the State, including children with disabilities attending private schools, regardless of severity of their disabilities, and who are in need of special education and related services are identified” (1997). Children may be “found” through mass screenings tests or if parents or school personnel suspect that a child has a disability. The parent or school personnel may refer the child for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services. Once a child is identified and determined that special education services are warranted as indicated from a special education evaluation, the child is provided with an IEP. This individual education plan describes in writing the child’s present functioning level, measurable goals and objectives to be worked upon, and what special education and related services are to be provided.

In addition, the IEP also includes the extent to which the child will or will not be included in the regular education classroom. The concept of appropriate placement is an important one in determining where instruction and related services will be delivered.

According to Section 1412 of IDEA, children must be placed in the “least restrictive environment” (LRE). To comply with this mandate, special educators strive to educate children with disabilities in the mainstream setting. That is, as much as possible special education youngsters should be educated in regular classroom with children who are not disabled. Removal from the regular education classroom is only acceptable when the nature of the disability is so severe that “education services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (1997). Parent involvement is also an integral part of the process and an IEP is not implemented or changed without notice to the parents.

In 1997, Congress amended IDEA once again to strengthen the assistive technology (AT) component requiring IEP teams to determine whether the student requires AT devices and services. Further under IDEA, as noted in Typewell (2002) “if a district cannot provide the appropriate educational services necessary for the child to progress, that youngster may be placed in another school out of district (public or private) paid for by the sending district” (p. 2).

It is important to note that IDEA has had the most significant impact on public schools. Since its enactment, millions of youngsters who once were thought incapable of participating and learning in the public school environment are now achieving at levels previously thought impossible. Currently included in regular education classrooms, many special education youngsters with developmental disabilities are experiencing success, graduating from high school, and going on to college and productive careers. IDEA has made this progress possible.

Nevertheless, IDEA’s regulations form the basis for a complex system of legal rights and responsibilities that are often difficult to keep up with and difficult to

interpret. As a result, many school administrators find themselves embroiled in law suits and due process hearings resulting from confusion on their part and parents' part as to what exactly the law provides to handicapped youngsters and what it does not provide.

In addition, special education advocates, although they acknowledge the success stories made possible by IDEA, they are quick to caution that more needs to be done to improve the status of youngsters with disabilities. Specifically, it has been observed by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERA) (2002) that:

twice as many children with disabilities drop out of school. Without the education and support services needed to help these youngsters develop their potentials, they fall into the cracks of unemployment, and often end up in the criminal justice system. Girls with disabilities who drop out more often than their non-disabled peers become unwed mothers. Some states do not hold children with disabilities to the same high standards and exclude them from the mainstream curriculum and assessments. (IDEA, 97, p. 1)

Therefore, further discussion at this time is warranted to understand this noteworthy law since it is the underlying legislation that has sparked the growth of the Special Education Parent Advocacy industry to date.

Currently, Congress is working to reauthorize IDEA in an attempt to address these concerns. In amending IDEA 97, Congress intends to assure that rights of children with disabilities are protected, and to assist states in providing services. Specifically, according to OSERA (2002) the new IDEA hopes to:

1. Raise the expectations for children with disabilities;
2. Increase parental involvement;

3. Ensure the participation of regular education in the planning of IEPs;
4. Include special education populations in standardized assessments given to regular education youngsters; and
5. Support better professional development for all teachers in order to understand and to address the needs of special education populations.

The Rising Costs of Special Education

LaMorte (2002) explained that the costs associated with implementing IDEA are funded only in part by the Federal government. Initially, this funding enabled local districts to develop and implement special education programs. However, as time went on and as costs and numbers of classified students increased, the ability to cover all of the costs of special education diminished. Currently the government only covers 15% of the total costs of providing special education services to youngsters in need. Since the passage of Public Law 94 – 142 in 1975, schools have been increasingly challenged to pay for all of the education and related services that would benefit the learning needs of disabled students. According to LaMorte (2002), the law guarantees a FAPE “but schools are not required to provide the most expensive services as long as the services provided are appropriate and sufficient to provide educational benefits” (p. 330).

However, for some children, only the most expensive accommodations and modifications are appropriate. This can break even the most affluent school district’s budget. LaMorte (2002) further explained that “some schools now spend 20% of their total budgets on special education,” (p. 331) adding to the special education funding dilemma facing administrators. This is particularly challenging since, according to

Berman and Urion (2003), current "school district policy and practice [are] ineffective in containing and even reducing the percentage of children who [require] special education services" (p. 6). Parrish (2000) noted that special education enrollments appear to be growing about twice as fast as those of all students.

According to Parrish (2000), in the Massachusetts' School Superintendents' Report the increase in special education has been due to:

such medical, economic, and social factors as the advances in medical knowledge and technology, the deinstitutionalization of special needs children, the consequences of higher percentages of children living in poverty, and the increase in families experiencing social and economic stress. (p. 6)

To cover the costs of these services, federal, state, and local spending on special education is rising an estimated \$3 billion per year. The \$1.4 billion increase in federal special education aid allocated for the Fiscal Year 2000 was well short of these rapidly rising costs. In addition, Parrish (2000) noted that since government funding does not "cover the full costs of special education mandates, the burden on local funding sources has increased from 39% to 45%" (p. 1).

Additionally, Parrish (2002) explained that as local districts are asked to bear the brunt of the funding for special education programs, questions have begun to arise regarding the impact of special education programs on the general education programs. However, she noted that research suggests that the evidence does not support the claim that special education costs are having a deleterious fiscal impact on general education. Rather "research indicates that spending on general education has risen considerably since the passage of IDEA in 1975" (p. 1).

However, research reviewed by Parrish (2002) indicated that perhaps too many youngsters are being classified and included under the umbrella of special education. As opposed to classifying only the youngsters with the most severe disabilities, an examination of the current trends strongly suggest that the majority of special education enrollments come from students who demonstrate less severe handicapping conditions. This increase accounts for approximately 90% of the increased costs of special education. Parrish (2002) felt that it is important to note that "per pupil expenditure in special education only increased by 10%" (p. 5).

This data suggested that perhaps administrators are ignoring the capacity of the general education program to address the needs of less severely disabled students under its domain rather than under the umbrella of IDEA. By addressing a broader range of diverse learners through the use of best practices and strategies in the regular classroom, administrators could bring special education costs under greater control. The local district might look to alternative, less costly support services to accommodate the needs of some learning disabled youngsters. Byrnes (2003) suggested minimizing special education costs by providing early intervention strategies in the early grades to eliminate unnecessary referrals especially for those children who merely need a little more time and attention in order to learn to read.

Nevertheless, to address this difficult funding problem, Congress is working to reauthorize IDEA to possibly include an increase to 40% of the total funding to assist local districts in managing the costly services required by law in special education programs.

General Administrator's Training in Special Education Best Practices, Policy,
Procedures and the Law

Principals and special education directors face numerous pedagogical and financial challenges in the process of delivering special education programs at the local district level. Given the costs and the complexities of ever-changing laws and regulations associated with special education, it is often an overwhelming task to guarantee that all stakeholders in the process will be satisfied. Parents, regular education teachers, and special education teachers are often caught in a web of confusion. It is difficult to always know how to initiate and to proceed with an inclusive program for a student with disabilities when financial constraints and misinterpretations of special education laws appear to confound rather than to support the process. Considerable guidance is required.

Therefore, this difficult situation begs the question: What level of knowledge, competence, or coursework is necessary for a principal to possess in order to help all special education stakeholders in his/her district to effectively interpret special education mandated policy and to implement a sound special education program? A review of literature in the field suggested that the success of special education programs primarily hinges upon the principal who is viewed as the responsible local leader holding the key to the sound implementation of inclusive practices.

According to Patterson, Bowling, and Marshall (2000), special education and regular education teachers believe that without the support of the principal, their efforts fall short. In addition, parents and special education advocates also view policy implementation as dependent on the principal's leadership. As instructional leader, the

principal serves the school community best when he/she chooses “to take an active role in the process of delivering special education programs by gaining knowledge of the intricacies of special education services and regulations and keeping abreast of trends and changes in the field” (p. 16).

Patterson and colleagues (2000) also suggested that principals must:

1. Have a basic understanding of special education services, laws, and regulations, court cases, and funding.
2. Understand district policies and their implications for the entire school.
3. Understand district norms regarding support/guidance of policy implementation and not defer to district office and special education administrators for guidance.
4. Participate in ongoing education regarding the trends in special education and the multiple definitions of inclusion.
5. Participate in ongoing education regarding leadership philosophy and strategies to facilitate...inclusive practices. (p. 19)

Thus, it is considered desirable that in the process of gaining competency in understanding the intent and language of IDEA, principals may be better able to construct local policy regarding special education programs. In addition, they will avoid the litigation that often accompanies misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Kluth, Villa and Thousand (2002) suggested that administrators consider the following questions:

1. Are students in the least restrictive environment?

2. Is the district providing students with disabilities with the necessary supplemental supports, aids and services?
3. Do teachers and administrators understand their responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?
4. Do teachers and administrators talk about mandated inclusive education as if it were a choice that can be made by a school or by a teacher?
5. Do school personnel require additional training? (p. 5)

When administrators take the time to reflect and act upon these types of questions, the likelihood of lawsuits and due process hearings diminishes and the likelihood of enhancing the quality of special education programs increases.

Nevertheless, according to Tryneski (as cited in Patterson, 2002), despite the federal mandate for inclusive practices, few states require principals to participate in professional development in special education. Principals are not required to demonstrate their competence or to take courses in the area of special education. Tryneski also noted that “only Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Maine, and Missouri require that principals complete some level of professional development to administer special education programs” (p. 17).

Interestingly, Bollero (2001) suggested that principals and special education administrators should become adept in the practices of principled bargaining familiar to most negotiators in the sector of collective bargaining. As such, the team that will represent the district at the IEP meeting with the youngster’s parents will keep in mind that the ultimate focus is not to win at any cost, but to forge a workable contract that effectively mobilizes each constituent’s goals for the child.

In the process, the less adversarial tenets of mediation and brainstorming were also recommended to clearly articulate what each party wants to determine how to put reasonable, pedagogically sound requests for accommodations and modifications into effect for the youngster. Bollero (2001) further cautioned that when an IEP meeting begins to be a power play between the district and the parents, all is lost. Emotions rule the process and no one wins.

Bollero (2001) suggested that participants in the IEP meetings must make every attempt to utilize the principles of mediation. These include:

1. Attempting to sustain relationships.
2. Keeping the focus on the child's needs, not the district's resources or the parent's expectations.
3. Identifying specific, measurable, realistic goals.
4. Acknowledging the reality of the district's limited resources.
5. Having a back up plan or "face saving" way out of a dilemma if the desired one is not feasible. (p. 8)

Bollero (2001) also stated that "mediators know [these secrets] of successful mediations... [They are] the difference between positional bargaining and principled bargaining" (p. 8).

Bar-Lev, Neustadt, and Peter (2002) also examined the role mediation can play in the process of making decisions with the child's best interest in mind. Specifically, they cited the following advantages in knowing how to effectively use mediation to avoid a due process hearing:

1. Mediation is less expensive than due process. Costs vary from state to state, but typically costs do not exceed \$1,500.

2. Mediation is an expeditious process taking 20 to 30 days as opposed to months in due process.

3. Mediation improves relationships since it addresses both school and family interests building on everyone's shared interests.

4. Mediation is less adversarial because it looks to the future to identify the child's needs and how they can best be met. Due process imposes an immediate outcome on the parties with which they may not be satisfied.

5. Mediation is confidential. Discussions in mediation are not admissible in any possible legal hearing to come.

6. Mediation is shaped by involved parties. Parent and educators contribute to the construction of the agreement which can be reshaped at any time to more clearly reflect the child's best interests.

7. Mediation encourages creative solutions because the perspective is broader than that in due process allowing both parties to "step outside of the legal box." (pp. 2-4)

Thus, it appears that administrators should avail themselves of considerable specific knowledge of special education policy, practices, and regulations if they wish to effectively implement measurably accountable education programs for special needs youngsters. This is not always seen in daily practice and must be given increased consideration if lawsuits and non-compliance accusations are to be avoided.

Inclusion

Inclusive education means that all students enrolled in public schools are educated together in regular education classroom, regardless of academic strengths or weaknesses. As such, every youngster is given the opportunity to fully participate in all areas of instruction and extra/curricula activities and is helped to feel a sense of belonging to the school, its programs and its social milieu.

Inclusive education hinges on the philosophy espoused by the Renaissance Group (1999) that suggests that “children that learn together, learn to live together” (p. 1). By grouping youngsters of varying abilities together, children with diverse cognitive styles and needs learn and grow in environments that resemble the environments that they will eventually live and work in.

Therefore, according to its advocates, inclusion stresses creating visions for communities and schools that incorporate best practices in teaching to address and to adjust to the specific and individual needs of all learners. According to Day (2002), the notion that “one size fits all” or the idea that regular education teachers teach to the middle range of abilities in the classroom is unacceptable to inclusion practitioners. In addition, the philosophy stresses that context matters in working with diverse populations. Teachers may need to learn and to utilize alternative strategies, expectations, and assessments for students to succeed in inclusive environments. This notion can be problematic for some traditional regular education teachers and some uninformed administrators. As noted by Day, herein, lays one of the catalysts to the often frustrating and emotional interchanges between special education practitioners, advocates, and adversaries.

The federal mandate concerning inclusive education comes from the 1997 amendments to IDEA. Under federal guidance, IDEA requires that children with disabilities be educated in regular education classrooms unless “the nature and severity of the disability is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Public Law 94-142 (S.6) (1975). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also requires that a recipient of federal funds provide for the education of each qualified handicapped person in its jurisdiction with persons who are not handicapped to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the handicapped person. Thus, schools have a duty to include children with disabilities in regular general education classrooms regardless of limited resources, past practices, or established routines and placements.

When schools ignore this duty and attempt to educate special needs children in self-contained special education classrooms without first attempting to make appropriate adjustments to educate these youngsters in the least restrictive environment, controversy may ensue and litigation might increase. Parents may become concerned that their youngsters will be relegated to isolated special education classes for the duration of their elementary and high school careers. They may also fear that, their children’s problems will be compounded by their lack of experience with more diverse social and emotional interchanges inherent in the regular education classroom.

Controversy regarding appropriate placement of special education youngsters can cause significant difficulties for all parties involved. Shultz-Stout (2001), in addressing the practice of inclusion, acknowledged the confusion confronting

administrators and parents and suggested that any discussion of inclusion should address several important questions to guide the decision process. These are as follows:

1. Do we value all children equally?
2. Is anyone more or less valuable?
3. What do we mean by "inclusion?"
4. Are there some children for whom "inclusion" is inappropriate? (p. 1)

Furthermore, Shultz-Stout (2001) suggested that some critics of inclusion might respond to these questions suggesting that advocates of inclusive classrooms are driven by an uneducated belief that inclusion is less costly and that "good" teachers *can* meet the needs of all students regardless of what those need may be. She also noted that proponents of inclusion might suggest that there is clearly no better way to educate youngsters than by including them in the regular education program without regard to the concomitant costs of making the practice work via supplementary aids, materials, physical plant changes and ongoing professional training and assessment.

It is also important to note that although the courts generally support the concept that schools make a significant effort to educate youngsters in the least restrictive environment, federal statutes leave several questions unanswered. Is it not clear to those who strive to implement special education programs exactly how far schools must go in terms of expenditures and accommodations to provide access to the regular education classroom for children with disabilities. Nor, according to Shultz-Stout (2002), is it clear exactly how much emphasis should be placed upon potential academic achievement and social growth in making placement decisions. Shultz-Stout further noted that "courts also do not delineate the rights of the other children in regular

education classrooms that are not necessarily considered when special needs youngsters are included" (p. 3). To compound the controversy, Shultz-Stout stated that:

there are no comprehensive or national data available on special education students' academic gains, graduation rates, preparation for post-secondary schooling, work, or involvement in community living. Therefore, an accurate comparison between separate programming and inclusive programming cannot be done. (p. 5)

Nevertheless, Kavale (as cited in Schutz-Stout, 2001) reported that there are a number of reviews and meta-analyses that consistently report little or no benefit for students when they are placed in special education settings. In contrast, Weiner (as cited in Shultz-Stout, 2001) in 50 studies comparing the academic performance of mainstreamed and segregated students with mild handicapping conditions, reported that the mean academic performance of the integrated group was in the 80th percentile, while the segregated students score was in the 59th percentile. With this evidence in hand despite its early 80s date, inclusion proponents denounce exclusionary programs in favor of more inclusive practices.

Shultz-Stout (2001) cited a more recent study at Johns Hopkins University, assessing the effectiveness of a school-wide restructuring program called Success for All, that provides empirical evidence supporting the belief that inclusive practices are effective. Success for All is a comprehensive program that includes significant parental involvement, ongoing teaching training, increased reading and tutoring, special reading programs, eight week reading assessments and expanded opportunities of preschool and kindergarten children. According to Shultz -Stout (2001), the data garnered indicated

significant gains for all youngsters, but particularly for students identified with exceptional educational needs. She noted “gains in academic achievement were reported as well as decreases in retentions, and increases in attendance” (p. 5).

Allington, McGill-Frazen, and Pinnel (as cited in Shultz-Stout, 2001), opponents of reactive remedial programs common to the practice of compensatory and special education, also support more inclusive practices for children with special needs. All three champion proactive early intervention programs in inclusive settings.

This literature strongly suggested that there is an ever growing concern that placement in exclusive special education classrooms is suspect since there is not much empirical evidence to support the practice. In addition, exclusion separates and labels children at a time in their lives when they should be exposed to the richness and diversity of the society in which they will lead their lives.

Therefore, it behooves the adults responsible for designing educational programs to restructure their perceptions and their organizational practice to accommodate the diverse need of all of the children in their care. In attending to this important educational matter, school administrators working closely with parents and teachers might take time to reflect on the best way to proceed. Research should guide the practice and mutual respect and shared vision should permeate the implementation of inclusive programs designed to nurture children so that they may build on their strengths and grow into successful contributing citizens of a diverse world.

Litigation in Special Education

Since federal legislation was enacted guaranteeing a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities (FAPE), schools have been challenged with the task of designing programs that meet the specific needs of this diverse population. Often faced with limited budgets and increasing parental requests for particular accommodations and modifications, schools have had a difficult time satisfying all constituents. In addition, over the span of 25 years since the enactment of the Education of all Handicapped Children Act (1975), American educators have been required to interpret federal laws, policies and mandates impacting special education that at times are unclear and subject to broad interpretation. As a result, according to Huefner (as cited in Yell, 2002), since Congress has never provided a substantive definition of FAPE in any federal legislation, these directives are difficult to incorporate and accommodate and are sometimes inappropriately applied. When this occurs, parents and schools may become embroiled in disagreements as to what constitutes an appropriate education for a particular special needs youngster. According to Huefner, when these disagreements cannot be settled amicably, "the district often finds itself involved in litigation calling for due process officers to interpret the meaning of a FAPE" (p. 205).

A landmark case cited in LaMorte (2002) that has served as the litmus test for a number of subsequent litigious claims regarding special education practice is Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982). In this case LaMorte (2002) explained that the Supreme Court held that FAPE was a right for all youngsters in special education but that the schools need only provide sufficient services to "permit the child to benefit educationally" (p. 315). Key to understanding

this decision is the word benefit since the court did not conclude that IDEA required schools to maximize the potential of each disabled child or to eliminate the effects of the disability as much as possible. As noted by Yell and Drasgow (2000), if individualized instruction allowed the child to benefit from educational services and was provided in conformity with the other requirements of the law, the student was receiving a FAPE. Additionally, students with disabilities are not entitled to the best possible education allowing them to achieve maximum potential. Rather, according to the court case, they are entitled by law to receive an education that is reasonably calculated to confer educational benefit.

To support other courts and school districts in their processes of determining whether or not schools have met their obligations under IDEA to provide a FAPE, the Supreme Court developed a two-part test. This two part test serves as a meaningful standard that asks whether or not a school has first, complied with the procedures of IDEA and second, has developed an IEP as a result of following standard procedures and that is reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits.

In subsequent cases that came before the courts, according to Osborne (as cited in Yell & Drasgrow, 2000) the literature showed that the court rulings generally favored school districts if the school followed standard IDEA procedures and fully developed a youngster's IEP. Thus, a district's adherence to the two-prong Rowley test proved to be key in defending itself against litigious claims brought by parents of special needs youngsters.

However, according to Yell and Drasgow (2000), in more recent FAPE cases the courts have begun to rule that the law's FAPE requirement goes beyond mere access to

a minimal education. Increasingly, the courts have suggested that special needs youngsters are to receive a meaningful education that is consistent with a student's overall ability and that can be measurably assessed in terms of a student's yearly progress. In *Board of Education v. Diamond* (1986) and *Polk v. Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit 16* (1988) the courts ruled that a FAPE must confer meaningful educational benefit. In *Hall v. Vance County Board of Education* (1985), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit found that the *Rowley* decision allowed courts to make case-by-case determinations regarding whether a particular education program conferred meaningful educational benefit and no generic formula could be applied in these cases.

Thus, Osborne (1992) in *Yell and Drasgow* (2000), suggested that the courts are beginning to more and more rule in favor of the student with a disability. This is seen especially when a district fails to show that a student's FAPE was individually designed to provide "educational advancement that was consistent with a student's overall ability and that [showed] a measurable gain in a student's progress" (p. 207).

Clearly, the law is not stagnant and as its interpretation in the courts becomes broader, school districts must keep up with current cases and rulings in order not to be rendered non-compliant. Each district might continually ask itself: (a) What programs and educational methodologies must be in place to meet the procedural and substantive requirements of a FAPE education to youngsters with special needs? (b) What are the program's costs to the district to consider when planning for implementation? Reference to *Lachman v. Illinois State Board of Education* (1988) and *Barnett v. Fairfax County School Board* (1991) provides support for the school district's choice of

the particular educational methodology utilized in the system. That is, according to Yell and Drasgow (2000) "parents of students with disabilities do not have a legal right to compel a school district to use a specific methodology or provide a specific program in educating their children, as long as school districts offer a FAPE" (p. 207).

Recently, however, according to Yell and Drasgow (2000), there have been a number of due process cases in which parents of children with autism have challenged the programs which districts have provided for their children. According to Baird (as cited in Yell, 2002), these due process hearings represent the fastest growing area of litigation in special education. In many of these cases parents are requesting that the district incorporate the Lovaas Treatment into their autistic youngster's program in the public school. Parents are also requesting that school districts pay for this costly treatment. As described in Yell and Drasgow (2000), the Lovaas Treatment:

is an intense behavioral training program that includes the practice of breaking down a variety of skills into small steps, teaching in a one-to-one discrete trial discrimination format, and increasing compliance with simple commands (e.g., "Sit down," "Stand up", "Look at me"). (p. 205)

Although the treatment may be effective as one of a number of treatments which has been proven effective for autistic youngsters, the question that is of critical concern is whether or not a district that may already have another treatment plan in place is required to acquiesce to the parent's request for a particular treatment of their choice that is enormously expensive. According to Yell and Drasgow (2000), the Lovaas program involves two to three years of one-to-one training with the child typically

conducted from two to forty hours per week by trained therapists in the child's home. The training program can cost from \$12,000 to \$70,000 per year.

As cautioned by Yell and Drasgow (2000), the Lovaas Treatment hearings are important to consider since they raise significant issues and questions with regard to the delivery and costs of special education programs in public schools. These include:

1. Can parents demand that school districts adopt particular educational methodologies?
2. Can costs be a consideration in designing programs?
3. Do school districts have a responsibility to reimburse parents for in-home programs? (p. 205)

Thus, these cases will impact the interpretations by the courts for all subsequent hearings not only for youngsters with autism, but for all students with disabilities.

Interestingly, most of the cases that have come to judicial review have been settled in favor of the parents requesting the Lovaas Treatment. Yell and Drasgow (2000) explained that districts lost their counter suits primarily because they did not follow the law and were in error due to IDEA procedural violations and/or substantive violations. Procedural violations of the IDEA include failure to provide for parental involvement, delayed or incomplete evaluations, inadequate IEPs, inappropriate placement, and using unqualified personnel. Substantive violations of the IDEA include failure to provide needed services and/or lack of student progress in the school program. In essence, the district did not apply the Rowley two-prong test in planning the IEP. Schools, therefore, inadvertently set themselves up for legal loses, not because the courts believed the Lovaas treatment to be superior in meeting the needs of autistic

youngsters, but because the districts were not careful in following the law. That is, they did not fulfill their obligation under the law to provide for a FAPE. In addition, according to Yell and Drasgow (2000), the Lovaas hearings and cases have advanced FAPE to a higher level by stressing meaningful educational benefits. Districts are cautioned to examine their data in assessing whether or not they are providing a meaningful education that achieves the goals and objectives set out in the student's IEP.

Furthermore, Yell and Drasgow (2000) noted that "hearing officers and courts are being more and more influenced by empirical research that demonstrates effective practices for assessing and evaluation students with autism" (p. 213). Since districts are beginning to be held to higher standards there are serious implications brewing for future dealings with parents who know what they want for their special education youngsters and who are willing to go to courts to reap their requests often to the potential financial detriment of the district. Districts must prepare themselves to meet these challenges based upon their full knowledge and adherence to the law.

Another area of special education that frequently causes legal concerns for school districts is parental preference for a youngster's classification under Section 504 versus classification under IDEA. As previously noted in Chapter I, Section 504 was originally intended to address the discrimination that was experienced in the job market by returning handicapped Viet Nam veterans. Later, as this civil rights law continued to be interpreted in the courts and as no age restriction was indicated in the legislation, Section 504 was viewed as a means through which handicapped individuals could receive reasonable accommodations to help facilitate their participation in publicly funded programs. These publicly funded programs included public schools in which

students would be guaranteed equal access and a chance to more fully participate in regular education programs afforded non disabled students. In addition, students classified under Section 504 were to be educated in regular education settings along with their non-disabled peers. However, the guarantee of equal access was not to be confused with a guarantee of equal achievement. Access under Section 504 was not analogous to educational benefit under IDEA.

The 1975 IDEA, replacing the EHA, was enacted to address the educational needs of students with learning disabilities in the public schools. Educational benefit was the goal. However, when enacted the best thinking of the time was that these students required special separate programs. Of course, it was intended that special education youngsters, once remediated, would be mainstreamed and returned to the regular classroom for their schooling. As years passed, numbers of youngsters with learning disabilities and other handicapping conditions were assigned to these special education programs. As Hayes (2000) explained that although vast sums of federal dollars were doled out to these initiatives, research suggested that not all youngsters benefited from well-intended classifications as learning disabled students. Often academic growth remained flat and some youngsters experienced serious declines in the equally important growth areas of self-esteem and socialization. Hayes also noted that the result of slowing down the pace of instruction for some special needs cognitively impaired youngsters, caused them to fall farther and farther behind their peers in the regular classrooms. Special education began to assume a negative profile and parents and educators were less than pleased with the lackluster results, despite enormous expenditures of time, energy, and money on the part of legislatures and educators. The

separate programs under IDEA cost money and put additional burdens on school budgets. Federal funding under IDEA would afford public schools the funds to partially pay for additional special educators, additional classroom space, equipment and materials. Therefore, regardless of the handicap or the disability, the preferred and cost efficient venue for accommodating special need youngsters was IDEA, which was federally funded and not Section 504 which was not federally funded.

Nevertheless, parents fearing the lack of significant progress and the negative labeling of their youngsters that often occurred when children were classified under IDEA and assigned to self-contained special education classrooms began to seek classification under Section 504. Since the youngster would be able to remain in the regular education classroom, parents believed that the educational and social benefits would increase.

Furthermore, the reform movement of the 1980s caused academics and politicians to take a closer look at what children should be taught, how they should be taught and in what venue. According to Tomlinson (1999), it is the current consensus that the self-contained and segregated classrooms of special education programs simply limit the potential learning of special needs youngsters. As a result, many schools have worked toward implementing a more inclusive model of education youngsters that shows great promise. Tomlinson, an advocate for differentiated instruction, has stated that:

As schools become increasingly diverse their capacity to provide a meaningful and empowering education for all individuals is directly related to our willingness to invest the time, resources, and guidance needed for ... teachers to

move away from teach-to-the-middle instruction. We must help them move toward teaching that meets individuals at their points of readiness, interest and leaning profiles. (p.118)

Thus, some parents who see their special needs youngsters floundering in school are looking for other avenues to help them navigate through special education rules and regulations. They want to see that their children are educated in a more natural environment with their peers and not segregated to an isolated classroom most of their school years. Currently, many parents insist that their youngsters remain with their peers in the regular classroom despite their handicapping conditions. Schools are mandated by law to provide the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 1997) for youngsters with special needs, but are at times reluctant (and legally non-compliant) to implement all-inclusive programs, because their vantage point sees what parents do not. Inclusion costs money, lots of it. Children with special needs require special accommodations regardless of placement. Instructional aids and certified teachers assigned to individual special needs youngsters for in-class-support are expensive. IEPs written in favor of the child and without regard for the cost of the services promised may leave a district in a financial and litigious hole.

Teachers who work with these youngsters also require special ongoing professional and collegial training to understand the philosophical and pedagogical shifts and best practice strategies required to individualize instructional and provide for full inclusion. According to Hehir (2003) the controversy around inclusion is:

dysfunctional and we need to shift from the value of inclusion as a practice to the successful implementation of inclusionary education that recognizes the full range of needs of the disability population. (p. 36)

Regardless of the administrator's fiscal concerns, parents of special needs students seem to prefer that their children be educated in a regular education classroom, rather than be stigmatized and inadequately educated in a separate special education environment. Moreover, many parents of special needs youngsters have been educated in part through IDEA's Parents' Rights in Special Education (P.R.I.S.E.) Handbook (2002), to know the laws and their rights. They have also availed themselves of the advice of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups (SEPAG) such as Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD), Kids Rights Advocacy, and Wrightslaw Associates. Thus, as educated consumers, these parents rigorously seek redress that would allow placement in regular education classroom but that would also afford their children the opportunity to receive accommodations to help level the academic playing field. Hayes (2000) noted that this level playing field is a direct reference to Section 504 and not IDEA.

Schools, however, according to Hayes (2000) do not welcome this line of reasoning initially for monetary concerns since Section 504 is not funded federally and also for the fact that 504 was clearly intended to provide equal access and not equal education. Thus, the letter of the law is contested as parents aggressively pursue alternate classification for their special needs youngsters under 504 and not under IDEA.

Additionally, Section 504 of the American Disabilities Rehabilitation Act was never really given precedence over IDEA in designing educational programs for special need students. Some administrators and Boards of Education, as a result, are not as completely familiar with the 504 legislation and its broader interpretations as some parents who have consulted special education attorneys and advocate groups. Therefore, inadvertently administrators do not always clearly communicate the 504 statute to parents or they offer it as a consolation prize if the child does not qualify under IDEA. As a result, some parents denied a requested 504 classification file complaints with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), claiming that due process was violated since they were not informed of their rights to accommodations and modifications under the 504 civil rights statute. According to LPR Publications (2002), those parents and students who are shuffled into 504 for want of a better solution, file grievances when services rendered by untrained teachers do not meet the needs of the youngsters.

Zirkel (2002) noted that what is occurring in some schools can be considered a litigious nightmare. Administrators, despite having the best interests of the children in need and the district at heart, are often caught in a crossfire of legal barrages and parental demands and complaints. Parents, believing that somehow acquiring the protection of particular Civil Rights laws will advance their child's cognition, are also snagged into a sticky web of legalese that often promises more than it can deliver. As a result, administrators, parents, and children are left dangling while attorneys and representatives from the OCR to try to untangle the various claims of abuse, neglect, and malpractice.

To add to the confusion, the literature suggested that special education and 504 experts disagree on the use of Section 504. Hayes (2002) suggested that:

Section 504 could be a major answer to help the tripartite U.S. school system that now houses 'regular education,' 'special education,' and 'alternative education.' This will happen when it is understood that most of the 504 'accommodations' are simply good teaching tools that any regular educator should use, as needed, in a classroom, without a federal mandate. Section 504 is a regular education issue, not 'unfunded special education.' (p. 5)

Zirkel (2002) queried the use of 504. He cautions that "once they [parents and students] get into 504 you are into litigation and due process." Rather, Zirkel advocated that schools "252" youngsters, (i.e., give them half of 504 or some of the reasonable accommodation they need in order to benefit from their educational experience). Zirkel explained that IDEA and Section 504 should be strictly reserved for youngsters who are significantly handicapped and who are truly in need of special education. Zirkel also stated that the level of trust on the part of parents in the state of New Jersey for school leaders, teachers, and child study teams is much lower than in other states and therefore, legality in this state is much higher.

Thus, it is clear that the decisions made by administrators and special education teams are not easy ones when it comes to providing services for children who need more than the average youngster to benefit from the education presented to that population. As a result, administrative decisions can be made that result in denial of parental requests, distrust, and hostility toward the district, its practices, policies and teaching staff. Resulting due process hearings and lawsuits place undue burdens upon

all constituents and impede the expounded goal of academic and social progress for children with special needs.

Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups

Livio (2003) reported in the *Star-Ledger* that a South Jersey facility for disabled children was found not to be responsible for the death of a 14 year-old boy with autism. The youngster was a resident in the care facility and died from pneumonia, a blood infection, and respiratory distress. The teenager's parents claimed that the facility excessively medicated and physically restrained the youngster to the point of compromising his immune system. After ten months of investigating the facility, authorities did not find any evidence that anyone in the facility intended to harm the boy. However, the state did cite the institution for other violations and fined the facility "for abusing and neglecting the boy by restraining him and leaving him unattended" (p. 18). Nevertheless, the parents of this youngster were distraught to learn the outcome of their lawsuit. The boy's mother stated that "[She didn't] feel anyone values the lives of the disabled and that is horrific ..." (p. 18).

In another *Star-Ledger* article, Livio (2003) reported that the state was about to suspend a supervisor at another South Jersey care facility for negligence in the aftermath of a death attributed to the choking of a 42 year-old disabled man. According to the state, the supervisor of the facility "failed to ensure a safe environment" for the resident who had an eating disorder (p.18). Since the kitchen door was not locked, the resident entered the kitchen and stuffed his mouth with bread, causing him to choke and ultimately to go into cardiac arrest and die. The complaint also cited the staff and the

supervisor for neglecting to closely monitor the resident and keep appropriate doors locked.

Although these incidents did not take place in a public school setting, in light of the present discussion, they are relevant. In years past, many disabled people not included in public schools were housed in institutions charged with their care and well-being. Often these individuals became victims of abuse and neglect and were denied their civil rights to safe and medically attentive environments. As a result, these individuals and their families experienced hardships and sought redress through the courts and by lobbying Congress for laws that would protect the rights of disabled individuals. The resulting laws and statutes including ADA and IDEA were passed to ensure that the kind of neglect and abuses delineated above would be eliminated. In a perfect world, this might be so. Nevertheless, after thirty years of protection under the law, disabled individuals are still at risk and distraught parents continue to fight for their loved ones in the courts.

It is in this emotionally packed environment that Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups (SEPAG) emanate and thrive. In reviewing the literature on these groups, it is noted that some groups appear to be more objective and state that their missions are to keep parents and guardians abreast of the information they need in order to access the protections under ADA and IDEA. They are not-for-profit organizations, underwritten by Departments of Education and/or individuals or groups who wish to share their understanding of the laws and their experiences with parents and guardians of special needs youngsters who are in need of support and guidance. Other groups,

however, appear more aggressive in their literature and mission statements and are in the business of making money through publications, consultations, and litigation.

It is interesting to note that many of these advocacy groups cite one another and contribute to the plethora of information regarding rights and services available to parents and guardians of disabled children and young adults. Nevertheless, it is observed that in the public school arena, when parents resort to civil complaints by pursuing due process, they often cite the district's inability or unwillingness to provide desired information regarding IDEA and ADA's provisions and available services that would address the special needs of their children. Johnson (2002) reported that one of the key frustrations regarding parents' experiences with special education is the difficulty of getting good information about what kind of help is available. According to Johnson:

...most parents say schools keep details about what kinds of programs are available for special-needs children pretty close to vest. Seven in 10 [parents] say that 'too many special-needs children lose out' because [they] don't know what they are entitled to. Over half (55%) complain that 'parents find out on their own what help is available to their children – the school is not going to volunteer the information.' (p. 161)

Getting the needed information regarding services for their special needs youngsters should not be an uphill battle given the readily available sources via Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and state and federally supported Departments of Education. Therefore, this situation begs the question: Do administrators deliberately withhold information due to rising costs of delivering these programs and budget

constraints within their districts or have they not had the training needed to understand special education rules and regulations? Thus, research is warranted to explain the growth of the Special Education Parent Advocacy industry and its impact on the delivery of special education services in the nation's public schools.

The following is a description of the more active Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, and their intended audience:

Wrightslaw (2002) is a web site designed for parents, advocates, educators and attorneys as a comprehensive resource for accurate up-to-date-information about effective advocacy for children with disabilities. The site is very well organized and includes an Advocacy Library, Law Libraries, and an A to Z Topics Page about dozens of topics from assessments to damages, discrimination, due process, eligibility, FAPE, high stakes tests, mediation, paper trails, retaliation, school personnel, and transition to name a few. This site also features an online chat forum and a free online newsletter covering special education issues and concerns. Additionally, it also provides a venue for purchasing books by Pam and Pete Wright and information regarding seminars, training, and consultations services provided by the proprietors, Pam and Pete Wright. According to a previous training and conference schedule, these advocates were "busier than ever" (2002 p. 2).

According to the Wrights (2002), advocacy is a vital service since:

Good special education services are intensive and expensive. Resources are limited. If you have a child with special needs, you may wind up battling the school district for the services your child needs. To prevail, you need information, skills and tools. (p. 1)

In the same article these advocates define advocacy, list the functions and types of advocates, and the roles they play in working for parents with special needs youngsters. The different kinds of advocates include lay advocates, educational advocates, school personnel, and parents. According to Wrightslaw (2002), advocates “gather information, learn the rules of the game, plan and prepare, keep written records, ask questions, listen to answers, identify problems, and propose solutions” (p. 4). Parents are encouraged to plan for the future, know their long-term goals for their child and to develop a master plan for achieving these goals, since parents should not “expect school personnel to make long-term plans for [their] child” (p. 5). Pam and Pete Wright are well known special education consultants frequently cited by other advocacy groups.

Also within this site are chapters from the Wrights’ book, *The Special Education Survival Guide* that is written by contributing special education attorneys and advocates. One of these is Crabtree (2002), an attorney concentrating in special education and disability law who suggested that “because the stakes are so high, it is difficult for parents of children with special education needs to advocate calmly and objectively for the educational and related services their children need” (p. 1). Crabtree cautioned parents to avoid some common mistakes that impede their ability to obtain appropriate services. Some of these mistakes include:

Viewing the special education process as the moral equivalent of war ...letting personal animosity toward administrators and/or teachers distort one’s judgment about what is best for the child and what is realistic to accept; ...trusting administrators and teachers too uncritically; assuming that if they are ‘nice’ they

are also competent and interested in serving the child's best interest;...waiting too long before getting good independent advice;...failing to educate the child's special education team about the child's disabilities and needs; ...not trying a program or added services even on a temporary basis...holding out for an alternative program only to have a hearing officer decide the untried program might have worked;...choosing the wrong independent evaluators: e.g., 'hired guns' who only say what the parents want them to say...;not documenting issues with the school;... seeing the school system as a monolith. (p. 2)

Crabtree (2002) also stated that school districts and advocates can make mistakes which may anger parents. School districts' mistakes include "actions that undermine trust, create a negative climate that destroys peace of mind, and deliver inadequate services to the child" and that "advocates mistakes include being insensitive to the power of their roles and the trust that parents place in them" (p. 3).

Crabtree (2002) and the Wrights (2002) encouraged parents to learn how to manage their children's special education documents under the IDEA thereby enabling them to become better advocates for their children with disabilities.

REED MARTIN J.D. Special Education Law & Advocacy Strategies (2002) is another website "where parents, advocates, attorneys and school personnel come for accurate answers to questions with strategies to secure [their] child's legal rights" (p. 1). This site also includes free articles, information on federal laws, court cases special education links, and a message board. Additionally, visitors to the site may purchase audiotapes, CDs, videotapes, and advocacy manuals. Three of the manuals advertised on the site are entitled: *Stop! Are You Really Ready To Ask For A Due Process*

Hearing?, “Section 504” *How you Can Use It To Get Your Child What They Need (Including Students and IDEA IEPs)* and *Advanced Advocacy Strategies: Are You Ready to Play Hardball?* Reed Martin who also offers phone consults and workshops is an attorney with 33 years experience in special education law.

The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA), (2002) is a news watch service that collects and organizes a “potpourri of press reports concerning disabilities, education of children with disabilities and the law” (p. 1). Members are invited to notify COPAA of relevant news stories to contribute to their news watch. Of particular interest to this study was an article originally reported in the March 23, 1999 issue of the *Bergen Record* entitled *Special Ed Programs in N.J. Condemned* by David Glovin. According to Glovin (1999), the U.S. government said that New Jersey has allowed local districts to ignore federal mandates regarding the implementation of mainstreaming and has not done enough to oversee local special education programs: “Serious deficiencies have been allowed to exist for a number of years... The state must take action to ensure that the state’s long-standing, serious non-compliance is effectively and promptly corrected” (p. 1).

It is interesting to note that at the time of retrieval (2002) of this article from the web site’s collection of “*News Articles of Special Interest from Around the Country*” that the press reports included were originally released between 1997 and 1999. No articles were included from the years 2000 – 2002.

Alfeld’s (2002) “*Save-a-Child*” is a special education advocacy service “for children who do not optimize their potentials in their current educational setting” (p. 1). This service is underwritten by Beverly E.S. Alfeld, M.A., M.F.A. who describes

herself as an “academic performance specialist and advocate” from Illinois. Alfeld encouraged parents to “be equal partners with [their] schools.” She provides assistance and information regarding IEPs, due process, the law, ADD, autism, dyslexia, expert witnesses and workshops for groups.

The National Center on Dispute Resolution (*CADRE*, 2002) is an advocacy group funded by the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. This group provides technical assistance and traditional support to state departments of education regarding the use of mediation under IDEA '97. CADRE also supports “parents, educators and administrators to benefit from the full continuum of dispute resolutions options that can prevent and resolve conflict...” (p. 1). CADRE’s primary goal is to help educators and parents to establish informed collaborative partnerships that focus on results for children and youth. This online support service also provides a searchable database of special education conflict resolution professionals, but does not guarantee the accuracy of this information and does not endorse the individuals that add their names to the database. CADRE also offers training resources in mediation, access to research and evaluation, and collaborative strategies to resolve disagreements about special education and early intervention programs.

Other advocacy groups are underwritten by the National Education Association, The National Parent Teachers Association, individual teachers, and parents with personal experiences with special education children, as well as state sponsored advocacy groups for parents, teachers, and administrators.

National Education Association's (NEA) (2002), web site is operated by the Association of Service Providers implementing IDEA Reforms in Education or ASPIRE, of which NEA is a partner, and IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators or ILIAD. These partnerships are funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Their goal is to keep parents, educators, and the general public informed about IDEA '97 and to suggest "strategies to improve education results for children and youth with disabilities" (p. 1). Access to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs includes the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports that focuses on "helping schools to build capacity for identifying adapting and sustaining effective school-wide disciplinary practices" (p. 1). This site also provides links to The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY), The Council for Exceptional Children, The National Center on Educational Outcomes, The US Department of Education Office of Special Education, and Wrightslaw Associates.

National PTA Education Resource Libraries includes links entitled: How to Advocate for Your Special Needs Child; Education of Children with Special Needs; Background of Special Education Legislation; Glossary of Special Education Terms; Educating Children with Attention Deficit Disorder; Learning to Walk in Another's Shoes; and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.

Des Jardins' (1993) article that appeared in *PTA Today* delineated for parents of special needs youngsters the steps to becoming an effective advocate. According to Des Jardins, who is cited as the executive director of the Family Resource Center on Disabilities in Chicago, Illinois, "[parents] need to understand the Special Education

rights of children with disabilities, effectively represent [their] child at meetings with school professionals and understand the options [they] have by law, if services [for their] child needs are not provided" (p. 1).

Steve Searfoss₂ (2002) maintains an advocacy web site which was designed and written by an individual teacher. Searfoss is currently the Disciplinarian and PE Supervisor for Voorhees High School in New Jersey. Prior to this position he was a special education teacher at North Hunterdon High School located in Annandale, New Jersey. According to Searfoss, *The Special Education Home Page* was put together for students and parents who "are working to gain more knowledge about the disability that affects their lives" (p. 1). A comprehensive compendium of topics and links to special education information on the web, this site champions the idea that knowledge about a particular disability and hard work on the part of the disabled individual, will lead to personal success. The site is very current and was updated for the 2002- 2003 school year.

Searfoss welcomes e-mail (specialstudents@sahpeup.net) to help in updating the site but emphatically states that he does not "wish to receive any information about commercial web pages or products for sale" (p. 2). According to Searfoss, "too many people have been misled by products that promise miracles and that do nothing more than disappoint hopeful consumers" (p. 2). He also cautions visitors that much of the information on the net is contradictory and that even the most respected professionals in special education at times disagree with one another. Therefore, he recommends that if parents have questions, that they seek the advice of a qualified professional and/or directly e-mail him with specific questions. This disclaimer is particularly noteworthy

since other advocacy sites do not offer similar cautions despite the fact that some of their links have not been updated and they offer services and products that are not critiqued or analyzed by special educational organizations.

The Special Educator's Web Pages (2002) is an example of a web site that appeared to be written by a parent of a special needs youngster, Robert Vaughn. However, due to the layout, it is unclear as to who the author is. Nevertheless, it is a parent/teacher friendly site that explained that IDEA 97 highlights the importance of collaboration between schools and parents in planning appropriate education programs for children with special needs. It encouraged communication between concerned constituents and suggested that this is accomplished through knowledge and use of "certain rules of engagement" (p. 1). Vaughn (2002) encouraged schools to treat parents with respect and to view them as team members with the most knowledge about the child in question. Parents are directed to articulate exactly what their goals and desires are for their children. Underlying this advice is the notion that knowledge is key in advocating for a child with special needs. Parents must know their rights and have knowledge of the process, while at the same time they must know that they do not have a right to every "bell and whistle" (p. 2). The two-prong Rowley Standard is cited. That is, The Supreme Court held that in determining whether or not a program is adequate for the needs of a particular youngster the district courts would focus on two issues:

1. Whether the State had complied with the procedures set forth in the IDEA.
2. Whether the particular individualized education program developed through the IDEA's procedures was "reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits." (*Board of Education v. Rowley*, 1982)

Vaughn also suggested that parents find “an opposing view rather than just rely on the advice of any one expert as a panacea for the child” (p. 2). In doing so, Vaughn explained that parents can reevaluate their positions and appear more reasonable to the school personnel.

Special Education in New Jersey: Process-Procedure-Resources is a parent designed web page by Linda Krup. According to Krup (2002):

most of the children in New Jersey receive a fine education. However, child study teams are overworked. The school administration always feels that they don't have enough money to go around. There is a built in bias against people who are different; in this case the difference is a disability. In the end who really is effected by poor education? If there were no problem, then we wouldn't have laws to correct them. Remember, you, the parent are the last and most effective safeguard your child has. (p. 1)

In particular, Krup included a disclaimer that explained that this site offers a lay-person's understandings of special education laws, where they can be found and some cautions for parents to consider. She stated that she is an experienced special education parent who has “successfully fought the system” (p. 1).

SNAP: Special Needs Advocate for Parents (2002) is an online advocacy service originated by the parent of a special needs youngster. It now has offices in Century City, CA and Florham Park, NJ. Its mission is “to provide information, education, advocacy and referrals to families with special needs children of all ages with disabilities” (p. 1). Links include the SNAP Community of Resources, Information and

Advice, the SNAP Newsletter, and the SNAP Bulletin Board, a forum to exchange ideas. The site also provides e-mail service at info@snapinfo.org. SNAP stated that it shares the “concerns of every special-needs parent...and...is proud to be able to offer SNAP’s services as a way of finding direction and achieving peace of mind when it comes to caring and planning for our most precious gifts: our children” (p. 1).

The Parents Exchange (2002) is an information, referral, and advocacy service for parents and caregivers that is based in Philadelphia, PA. This web site’s “main goal is to help parents avoid the need to ‘recreate the wheel’ every time they encountered an issue” (p. 1). Funding for this site comes from a grant from the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Planning Council and private donations. Parents are invited to visit the site to gain knowledge and experience regarding school placements, legal rights, recreation programs, medical services and insurance, financial supports and benefits, transportation, and general support. *The Parents Exchange* also presents at local, statewide, national, and international conferences. Networking and collaboration are encouraged in order to help parents to make the best decisions for their children and family.

Delphi Forums (2002) includes a “start page” entitled “Welcome to Special Education in New Jersey” as an entryway to one of their many forums. Visitors are invited to browse the site to see a summary of the latest discussions on topics such as independent evaluations, speech therapists, public reporting of statewide results, board of education accountability, and decisions not to evaluate. Instant messaging to other people in this forum is also possible.

The National Parent Information Network (2002) is available through the *Educational Resources Information Center's (ERIC) (2002)* portal and is funded through the National Library of Education (NLE). It also links parents to information regarding President Bush Administration's education policy, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The Network's posting, *What does "No Child Left Behind" mean for parents?* explained NCLB and its relevance for parents with special needs youngsters.

Another active parent advocacy group is the *Texas Special Education Resource Center* (2002). This site suggested that "NOTHING can replace the collective guidance and understanding of other parents who've been [through the special education process]" (p. 1). It also quoted an African proverb which states "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion" (p. 1). Visitors are invited to share their Texas success stories with other Texas families regarding IEPs, In-home training, and transition plans. The site also offered links to Wrightslaw, Reed Martin, EDLAW Inc., The Disability Policy Consortium of Texas and NY Times articles on inclusive education among numerous other resources. Visitors to the site are also encouraged to e-mail Steve Searfoss at stlevine@icsi.net.

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, Inc. (SPAN) of NJ (2002) is an example of a state funded resource group that provides information, training, technical assistance, support, and the exchange of ideas to families, professionals, and others interested in the "well being and education rights of children" (p. 1). According to its description, SPAN staff and resource parents assist over 170,000 individuals each year in resolving education problems, free of charge. SPAN also offer comprehensive training in workshops and seminars designed to promote parent and professional

development. To date it reports that it has reached over 2 million individuals statewide. SPAN, in conjunction with other advocacy organizations, conducts action-oriented research on issues that form the basis of reform-directed negotiations with public officials. Emphasizing collaboration, SPAN encouraged parents to become effective partners and agents for change through advocacy.

The SPAN Network offers information specialists who assist parents and educators, extensive publications on law and advocacy and school reform, annual conferences for parents and educators to network and exchange ideas, bilingual information training and technical assistance, as well as a comprehensive internet resource.

Similar to New Jersey's SPAN is a group in Concord, Massachusetts called Concord SPED PAC (2002) or Concord Special Education Parents Advisory Committee (Concord SPED-Pac, 2002). According to its stated mission, this organization "provides education to parents and the broader community on special education issues and services. It works towards the understanding of respect, support, and appropriate education for all children with special needs...to ensure that students' needs under Chapter 766 and other applicable laws are being met" (p. 1). Unique to this site is a page that lists the group's accomplishments since 1998. These include offering educational presentations each school year, creating the website, meeting monthly with the Special Education Director, and participation in the West Concord Family Festival by providing an information booth. In addition, this site includes the names and e-mail addresses of SPED PAC chairs, liaisons, and elementary, middle school and high school

contact persons as well as a detailed listing of Speech and Language Milestone Chart referenced to the Learning Disabilities Association of American.

Interestingly, as noted previously many of the advocacy sites reference one another. Concord SPED PAC lists four Special Education Law sites that have useful information regarding special education and advocacy. These are the Wrightslaw web site, Special Education and the Law article by Robert K. Crabtree on the Family Education web site, Reed Martin, J.D. web site and The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) web site.

In addition, Concord SPED PAC stresses facilitating a productive partnership between parents with children in special programs and the school by becoming a resource for parents and the community. Meeting are announced in monthly and weekly school notices and on the community cable station and the Concord community web site as well as their own web site at <http://concordspedpac.org/Mission.html>

The Federation for Children with Special Needs (2002) is another comprehensive resource site located in Boston, Massachusetts that provides information, support, and assistance to parents of children with disabilities. According to its mission statement this organization is “committed to listening to and learning from families, and encouraging full participation in community life by all people, especially those with disabilities” (p. 4). The Federation’s annual conference on March 1, 2003 was devoted to “Strong Families in a Changing World” (p. 1).

Marc Sheehan's Special Education/Exceptionality Page (2004) contains the “best special education-related and exceptionality-related links...” (p. 1), as well as lesson plans page and an education resources page. This site is written and designed by

Marc Sheehan and is recommended by Innovative Teaching. It also received the Special WEB Award on March 5, 1999.

Parent Advocacy in Special Education (2003) have an online course instructed by Dennis Mithaug, an employee of Universal Class. Universal Class offers a number of other online courses. The cost of the Parent Advocacy course is \$25.00 and participants who complete the lessons are awarded a certificate that can be made "official" for an additional cost of \$20.00. Intended to help parents "empower themselves to effectively advocate for their children with disabilities" (p. 1), the course lessons include definitions of advocacy, a history of civil rights advocacy in the United States, an overview of communication skills deemed essential for effective advocacy, tactical strategies, a compendium of federal laws and special education terminology, and information on other parent networking groups.

As is apparent from the sites summarized above, there are a plethora of informational resources available to parents, educators, and other individuals concerned about the rights and aspirations of special needs youngsters. Caution must be taken, however, when using these sites. Not all advocacy sites clarify their sources and some even appear to assert a "we versus them" attitude that may impede the collaborative efforts of parents and educators as they strive to design and implement the best possible programs for disabled children and young adults.

Government Policy: No Child Left Behind

On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act into law. This act proposes to close the achievement gap between youngsters in the

most successful, affluent schools and those youngsters who are not successful and who tend to populate the least affluent schools by holding all students to high levels of achievement and all schools to high levels of accountability. According to Secretary of Education, Ronald Paige (2002), this new law advances reform “in America’s schools that for too long split us into two nations: One that dreams and one that doesn’t. One that is hopeful and one that is hopeless” (p. 1).

One of the cornerstones of NCLB is a strong emphasis on accountability for results, including specific, rigorous statutory requirements that states must implement to determine the annual yearly progress (AYP) of each public school, Local Education Association (LEA) and the state itself. President Bush, in advancing this legislation, holds to the conviction that the goal of leaving no child behind can be met if schools and LEAs are held accountable for the improved achievement of all students. To accomplish this, a state must submit evidence to the secretary, for peer review, that describes the state’s accountability system and demonstrates how it has integrated the AYP provisions required by the statute and regulations. In regard to children with special needs, alternate achievement standards are allowed for the children with the most significant cognitive disabilities for determining the AYP, as long as the academic content and achievement standards that apply to all public schools and public school students in the state will be applied to alternate assessments. Furthermore, NCLB (2002) requires states to include graduation rates as well as other indicators to determine their definition of AYP.

The new law also has provisions to set timelines for school improvement, to provide opportunities for school choice and to clarify standards for supplemental

educational services for students with disabilities and limited-English proficient students. It also supports scientifically researched-based providers of instructional strategies/programs and funding for supplemental services and school choice.

Teacher quality is also addressed in the new law stressing the need for sustained, intensive and classroom-focused training for individuals pursuing the alternate route and for highly qualified standards for core subject teachers and for special education and bilingual teachers who directly instruct students in any core academic subject.

In interpreting this new law for parents, it is interesting to reference Wrightslaw, (2002) one of the most widely used parent advocate groups. Wrightslaw cautioned that since “this statute will affect educational policy and decision-making for years, we need to learn more about it” (p. 1). Wrightslaw also quotes President Bush who stated that:

As parents you are your children’s first teachers and their strongest advocates.

You have a critical role to play – both in how you raise your children and in how you work for meaningful and accurate accountability in their schools. (p. 1)

As Wrightslaw proceeded to explain the law to visitors to its website, it also connected the law’s objectives regarding “regular, objective information on student progress” to the information they have already provided in their book, *From Emotions to Advocacy*. In addition, Wrightslaw noted that NCLB (2002) specifically applies to children with disabilities because “this law should make it easier to get annual objective testing of [the child’s] skills – a traditional battleground for many parents of kids with disabilities” (p. 4).

Wrightslaw (2002) concluded its discussion with its concerns regarding NCLB. Wrightslaw stated that educational reform is difficult because:

1. Schools are bureaucracies-they vigorously resist change... administrators want to run their school-factories as they see fit... staff believe that their primary mission is to socialize children, not to teach knowledge and skills.
2. Politicians get sidetracked when they set out to improve educational results.
3. Parents are afraid... parents of kids with disabilities have more fears... that their children will be damaged by high stakes standards and tests. And school people who support the status quo will play on these fears.
4. Children are damaged by: low expectations, the prevailing belief that kids with disabilities cannot learn, the failure to teach kids to read, the failure of schools to measure and remediate skills, and the failure to use research-based instructional methods and strategies.
5. ...the U.S. Department of Education has a dismal track record in enforcing the IDEA. (p. 6)

Ironically, Wrightslaw's concerns run contrary to the goals of NCLB which fully intends to advance academic achievement through adherence to high standards and accountability. Rather than praise the government for its effort, it appears that Wrightslaw chose to cloud NCLB under a veil of suspicion.

Parents' Views: When It's Your Own Child

According to Johnson (2002), there is a growing concern among reformers that special education, although launched initially with glowing intentions, has somehow gone awry. That is, there are many issues that must be addressed in order to make special education work for the children and families that become part of this

complicated service oriented program. One of these issues is full funding by the government that would benefit those involved. This is one of the major thrusts of President's Bush's new education policy, No Child Left Behind. Washington is considering a number of proposals that would dramatically increase special education funding for states and localities. According to a SPAN (2002) Action Plan, under NCLB, 90% of IDEA funds will be targeted for direct services, and that discretionary Part B federal funding would increase up to an established, definable threshold of "excess cost" (p. 5). Bush's plan also calls for increased funding for Part C (early intervention) and 619 (preschool special education) that would encourage states to plan programs that emphasized early evaluations and instructional routines to improve educational and social performance for special needs youngsters. In addition, the plan includes future funding increases above the threshold amount to improve accountability for results.

However, Johnson (2002) stated that "...inside and outside education, some are asking whether more money from the federal government, as helpful as it may be to local districts, will truly solve special education's problems" (p. 160). Of particular concern to advocates of special education reform are the growing numbers of students who seem to be assigned to special education when in fact their problems are actually behavior related. Reformers are also questioning the disproportionate numbers of male African American youngsters included in special education programs and the number of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Reformers also wonder whether or not existing programs are really helping special needs youngsters achieve more in school.

Thus, Johnson (2002) posed the bolder question asking not whether special education needs more money, but whether it is time to reform that entire system to better serve disabled youngsters in the public school setting. In a Public Agenda Survey: *When It's Your Own Child*, reported by Johnson, the views of 510 parents of public school children who had special needs were sought on the quality of special education teachers and programs, the evaluation process, mainstreaming, and standards. Public Agenda also asked parents about their hopes, fears, and aspirations for their children.

The results of Public Agenda's survey suggested that parents generally give schools good marks. Sixty-seven percent are content with the quality of local programs, and their caring teachers who know a lot and the emphasis on early identification. Parents also reported progress on the social front in regard to how their special needs youngsters are viewed by other children. Sixty-nine percent believed there is less stigma. A minority of parents surveyed expressed frustration and voiced serious complaints.

Nevertheless, Public Agenda (2002) revealed that the key frustration for parents (as noted previously in this discussion) is the difficulty they find in getting good information about what kind of help is available. Schools don't always volunteer information and among the minority of parents dissatisfied with special education, some described their schools as "impenetrable, circuitous bureaucracies where no one seems to have any answers or to be able to get anything else done" (p. 161).

Only eleven percent of parents felt that schools were in a rush to classify youngsters, with the majority of parents stating that they suspected that schools were "recruiting" students for special education. However, two-thirds (65%) of the parents

surveyed said that youngsters with behavior problems rather than special education disabilities sometimes wind up in special education. In addition, 69% of the parents said that many youngsters could avoid special education altogether if help were given earlier.

In regard to the standards, most parents agreed that special education youngsters need to be tested and held accountable. Seventy-nine percent reported that schools should pay more attention to academic progress for special needs youngsters and 58% said that students and teachers would take learning more seriously if special needs youngsters were required to take standardized tests. Most special education parents believed that some accommodations [in testing] were reasonable for their special education youngsters.

Interestingly, Public Agenda (2002) reported that few of the parents surveyed understood the policy questions being debated in Washington. Sixty-three percent said that they were not too familiar with IDEA and 27% admitted not knowing what role the federal government plays in special education. Only 29% said that "much of what happens in special education takes place because of the federal government" (p. 162).

When Public Agenda (2002) asked about desirability of the federal government contributing more money to special education programs, 52% of the parents surveyed said that the best way to improve special education is to provide "...better programs and policies, not more money" (p.162). It is also interesting to note that according to Public Agenda, both "special education critics, parents and the special education advocacy community often focus on the identification process as being particularly troublesome and not the lack of funding or resources" (p. 162).

In summarizing Public Agenda's findings, Johnson (2002) stated that the message to those who cry for special education reforms is that considerable attention should be paid "to ensure an open dialogue with families who are genuinely concerned and protective about their youngsters without antagonism and threats" (p. 162). Johnson further explained that parents enter a discussion of special education reform with a mindset different from administrators and others. Parents are not looking for long-term fiscal budgets. They are also not wondering how to balance resources that must be allocated to the various interests in public schools nor are they dealing with the complexities of paperwork or shortages of special education teachers.

Ideally, administrators know this about parents and understand that eminent to a parent's perspective is that their own child is well-treated and making progress. If this information is not acted upon, however, administrators run the risk of earning the harsh criticism that is so readily available from special education reformers and special education advocates. SEPAG's businesses thrive when parental needs and concerns are not taken seriously or are met with disrespect in the special education arena by seemingly insensitive and/or inadequately prepared special education administrators.

Thus, careful consideration must be given to parents of special needs youngsters. Johnson (2002) noted that it is yet unclear whether or not the very vocal disaffected minority of parents that are extremely frustrated about their experiences with special education, will question whether "the reformers are fighting for them or against them" (p. 160). As more and more parents become disaffected with administrators' reluctance or the perception of reluctance to give parents the information they require regarding programs and services available to their special

needs youngsters, there may be an increase in the use of outside parent advocacy groups who may encourage avenues of redress that often lead to due process hearings and embittered legislation. According to the Public Agenda (2002), "One in six special education parents say they have considered a lawsuit" (p. 3). Furthermore, over half or 55 % of the parents surveyed felt that it is up to parents to find out on their own what help is available because "the school is not going to volunteer the information" (p. 4).

Special Education Reform – The Reauthorization of IDEA

Recent reports and articles have advocated the reform of special education. Among them are SPAN (2002) Action Alert: *Summary of the Findings of President Bush's Commission on Excellence in Special Education*, and the CATO Institute's Policy Analyst's article by Gryhpon (2002) entitled *Reforms Crucial to Special Education*.

According to the Summary of the Findings of President Bush's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, "IDEA is generally providing basic legal safeguards and access for children with disabilities" (p. 1). However, a number of problems were noted that suggested that it is time to reform special education.

Currently, according to SPAN (2002), IDEA places process above results. Paperwork, complex regulations, and ever-increasing administrative demands prohibit concentration on the most important goal of this law - student achievement. Children placed in special education by policymakers and educators are often thought to be outside the sanctions of regular education. As a result, in such a system children with disabilities are treated separately with unique costs, creating incentives for

misidentification and academic isolation and thereby preventing the pooling of all available resources to aid learning.

Furthermore, according to this summary, many of the current methods of identifying children with disabilities lack validity, so that some children are misidentified, while others are not identified early enough or at all. Additionally, children with disabilities require teachers who are highly trained and credentialed. Better preparation, support, and ongoing professional development are not always available, nor are researched-based practices embraced in the current system. Most notably the report stated that "the current system waits for a child to fail, instead of utilizing a model based on prevention and intervention" (p. 1).

Recommendations of President Bush's Commission included replacing federal monitoring practices with an approach focused on results instead of process, embracing a model of prevention, not a model of failure, and considering children with disabilities as general education children first. Flexibility in the use of education funds including those provided through IDEA is considered essential. Moreover, emphasis on more rigorous training in reading for general and special educators as well as recruiting and training highly qualified general and special education teachers, including minority teachers are among the priorities. The President's commission also recommended improving the coordination of special education research thereby requiring the Rehabilitation Services Administration, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research and OSEP to work collaboratively to improve research related to individuals with disabilities.

Concomitantly, Gryphon (2002) of the CATO Policy Institute summarized similar concerns and recommendations of the Washington Education Association as revealed in a recent survey on special education. According to this instrument while IDEA has played a “positive role in opening the doors of public school to disabled children, the statute is a disaster when it comes to the one thing parents need most: Peaceful, efficient provision of high-quality educational services” (p. 1). Gryphon further states that “parents overwhelmed by the system’s complexity, often turn to expensive IDEA lawyers for advice” (p. 2). Those who are the most aggressive in their pursuit, secure the most generous benefits. Those who do not have access to legal advice, receive less since administrators forced by budgetary constraints provide fewer benefits to parents who do not make trouble.

Gryphon (2002) noted that IDEA encourages “posturing and litigation rather than collaboration between parents and teachers” (p. 2). Gryphon’s recommendations to reform the system include possibly opting out of IDEA, thereby reducing bureaucracy, empowering parents, and freeing teachers who no longer need to rely on the state’s special education funding and its accompanying mandates. In addition, reform might include creating a portable benefit system that would allow for parental choice in spending special education money in either a public or private venue.

In summary, Gryphon (2002) explained that:

A reformed special education system would eliminate bureaucracy and expand educational options by getting rid of the two main sources of conflict between parents and schools: the amount of money available to each child for special services and the type of services each needs. (p. 2)

Conclusion

This review of reform literature suggests that despite significant gains in services and instruction to children with disabilities under IDEA, there remain serious areas for improvement that when appropriately addressed would better utilize the talents of those educators and administrators charged with planning and implementing special education programs.

Thus, this research study is valuable for exploring the reasons for the confusion over and the misinterpretation of these noteworthy special education laws that have polarized constituents, evoked litigation, and sparked the growth of the Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups (SEPAG). As suggested in the literature reviewed, the present special education system may indeed be due for an intensive review and subsequent overhaul. Administrators of special education programs in the nation's public schools will serve their constituents and their districts best when they make it their business to keep abreast of special education laws and issues, government policies and mandates, and the growing industry of special education parent advocacy groups.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore, through a survey technique, the perceived role of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in meeting the needs of public school special education students. Additionally, the researcher wished to gather information regarding the use of these groups in assisting administrators in planning educational programs for special needs students in public schools. The researcher also explored administrative education levels and the principal or special education director positions that may impact on the understanding of special education law in order to implement policies that effectively promote successful special education programs. As noted in Chapter I, initially the researcher also sought to examine the impact of administrators' genders and District Factor Grouping on administrators' evaluations of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. However, since neither of these variables reported significant statistical differences, they were excluded.

This chapter addressed the basic designs, variables, instrumentations, participants, reliability, data collections, methods of analyses, and response rates for this research.

Design

In order to evaluate administrators' use of and evaluations of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, particularly regarding their helpfulness in assisting

administrators in planning educational programs for special needs youngsters in our public schools, a questionnaire was developed and administered to principals and special education directors in four counties in New Jersey. These respondents represented administrators in Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic counties.

Variables

The administrators responded to a five-point Likert Scale that addressed the following independent variables: administrative levels of education and position that may impact their understanding of special education law and their ability to implement effective Special Education Programs and administrators' use and evaluations of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups.

The participants answered yes or no to the question representing the dependent variable: use of SEPAG. Other dependent variables in this study consisted of six factors including the Level of Helpfulness Scale: Helpfulness, Develop Communication Skills, Mistrust, and Mediation; and the Level of Concern Scale: Concern for Communication Skills and Concern for Issues of Mistrust. These measures were derived from a principal component factor analysis with a varimax rotation of (a) the 20-item Level of Helpfulness Scale and (b) the 15-item of Level of Concern Scale.

Instrumentation

The research instrument, Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups Survey, along with a letter of solicitation (Appendix A and B) was developed by the investigator from research in the field. To help establish content and construct validity, two special

education directors and two principals (Appendix C) evaluated the survey prior to IRB application. Appropriate changes were made to improve the instrument before dissemination. Once the questions were returned, the reliability of the items was established through inter-item correlation reliability.

Prior to IRB application submission, initial contact was made with district superintendents via a solicitation letter (Appendix D) seeking permission to conduct research in their districts.

Participants

The participants in the survey group consisted of special education administrators and principals currently employed in public school districts in four New Jersey counties: Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic. The listing of these educators was accessed from the New Jersey Department of Education web site. Permission to invite participation was solicited from local district superintendents. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The criteria for selecting administrators from Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic counties evolved from a consideration of the preponderance of A-J District Factor Groupings in these counties. Participation was open to all principals and special education directors in districts and schools for which permission was granted regardless of age, gender, race, or religion.

There were 121 district respondents. There were 44 district administrators participating from Bergen County, 30 district administrators participating from Essex County, 34 district administrators participating from Morris County, and 13 district

administrators participating from Passaic County. The respondents consisted of 43 special education directors and 78 principals. The highest level of schooling or degree, broken down by type of administrator, is reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Contingency Table of Type of Administrator by Level of Schooling

	<i>Special Education Director</i>	<i>Principal</i>
Four Year College	-	2
Master's Degree	22	47
Doctoral Degree	16	25
Other (MD, JD, Ed.S)	5	4
Total	43	78

Reliability

Once the questionnaires were returned, the reliability of these items was established through inter-item correlations. The reliabilities of the derived scales were estimated by the internal consistency of the items in each scale. Coefficient alpha, a measure of internal consistency i.e., the mean correlation for the scale items was used as the reliability coefficient. According to Nunnally (1967), "...even if other estimates of reliability should be made for a particular instrument, coefficient alpha should be obtained first" (p. 210). Nunnally further stated that alpha coefficients of .50 will suffice for "hypothesized measures of a construct" (p. 226). Therefore, alpha coefficients greater or equal to .50 were used as a minimum criterion for inclusion of a scale. Six scales satisfied the above criterion. (See Table 2).

Table 2

Inter-item Correlation Reliability Table

Scale – Level of Helpfulness	Items	Reliability
1. Helpfulness	7, 11, 17	.7125
2. Develop Communication Skills	6, 8, 9, 12	.7650
3. Mistrust	16, 20, 21	.7525
4. Mediation	14, 18, 24, 25	.7420
Scale – Level of Concern	Items	Reliability
1. Concern for Communication Skills	26, 27, 28	.7485
2. Concern for Issues of Mistrust	37, 38, 39	.5200

Data Collection

After making the corrections suggested by the evaluation group, the survey was mailed along with a cover letter of solicitation to 102 special education directors and 316 principals in public school districts in New Jersey. Participants were provided with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope requesting return of the completed instrument within two weeks. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. The survey did not require identification of the respondent or the district. Consent was implied in completing and returning the survey to the researcher. Prior to distribution, surveys were numbered only to provide a means to check off responses as they were received to determine possible second mailings if responses were low in number. Once data were analyzed, a summary of the findings was mailed to participants who so requested.

Method of Analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the study to analyze all research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to provide insights into the distribution of both dependent and independent variables (means and standard deviations).

Inferential statistics were utilized to include two-way ANOVA designs using SPSS 11.0. These techniques were used to determine if there were significant mean differences on the derived scales according to the following dichotomous independent variables: (a) Administrator's Education, and (b) Administrator's Position.

The dependent variables in this study were the use of SEPAG and the perceived helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups on an administrator's ability to understand special education law and to implement effective special education programs.

As conveyed previously, prior to IRB application, a jury of experts (two principals and two special education directors) evaluated the survey for construct and content validity. Additionally, reliability of the items was established once the questions were returned through inter-item correlation reliability. The reliability of the scales was estimated by the internal consistency of the items in each scale. The correlation matrices' (one-tail) significances were reported for (a) the Level of Helpfulness Scale and (b) the Level of Concern Scale.

Response Rate

In attempting to gather the information necessary to answer the survey questions, the survey instrument was mailed on April 18, 2003 to 316 principals and 102 special education directors in local school district in the counties of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic. Prior permission was granted to conduct the research in these districts by the incumbent local school superintendents through the use of a solicitation letter (Appendix D). Each mailing consisted of the cover letter requesting a two week return date, the survey instrument and a return stamped envelop addressed to the researcher. A second mailing, in the form of a postcard (Appendix F) reminding potential respondents of the researcher's urgent request to complete the survey, was mailed on May 31, 2003. Additionally, a number of phone calls were made to administrators in the designated districts encouraging their immediate response to the survey.

One hundred and twenty-one surveys were returned between the dates of April 28, 2003 and June 22, 2003 with the majority of the surveys arriving between the second and third week of collection. Thus, the number 121 surveys establishes the resulting sample population for this research, representing a 29% return rate. Although this response rate does not represent the 50% rate as suggested by Babbie (1990), it is a workable one in that the majority of the respondents reflected similar demographic representations of the non-respondents (i.e., education level, gender, position, and district factor grouping). It may be inferred that the responses of the non-respondents would likely have been similar to that of the 121 respondents.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analyses of the data based on the responses of special education directors and principals to the questionnaire developed by researcher for the purpose of this study were used to present the data compilations and address the research questions.

The frequencies of yes or no responses of 121 participants to the instrument's dependent variable of usage by administrators in the four counties surveyed were calculated and reported.

Two scales were developed for this study: a) a 20-item 5-point Likert scale, Level of Helpfulness, to measure if accurate information is given to clients and administrators, and (b) a 15-item 5-point Likert scale, Level of Concern, to measure administrators' understandings of special education laws and their ability to develop appropriate programs for special needs students.

Descriptive Statistics

The results of the responses of the 121 administrators are presented in Tables 10 and 11 in Chapter IV reporting the frequencies of the strongly agree (SA) = 5, agree (A) = 4, neutral (N) = 3, disagree (D) = 2, and strongly disagree (SD) = 1 responses to each of the items in the two scales. Items in which there were negative response rates to the items were recoded to strongly disagree (SD) = 5, disagree (D) = 4, neutral (N) = 3, agree (A) = 2, strongly agree (SA) = 1 to change these score measures to the same direction. The means and standard deviations for each of the responses were also reported.

Three items were recoded on the Level of Helpfulness Scale because the investigator wished to have all items scored in the same direction. As a result of the recoding, the investigator noted the respondents more frequently disagreed than agreed with (a) Item 1.16 - SEPAG promote an environment of mistrust between parents, administrators and Child Study Team, (b) Item 1.20 - SEPAG play into the concerns and fears of parents, and (c) Item 1.21 - SEPAG suggest that special education teachers and administrators are uninformed and not trustworthy. In the above three transformed items the strongly disagree (SD) response = 5, the disagree (D) response = 4, the agree (A) response = 2, and the strongly agree (SA) response = 1. The rotated factor loadings for the factor analysis of the 20 item Level of Helpfulness Scale are presented in Table 12 in Chapter IV.

In a like manner, one item was recoded on the Level of Concern Scale: Item 2.9 - Parents of special needs youngsters appreciated the district's concerns regarding budgets. In the above transformed item, the strongly disagree (SD) response = 5, the disagree (D) response = 4, the agree (A) response = 2, and the strongly agree (SA) response = 1.

Thus, items 1.16, 1.20 and 1.21, as noted above on the Level of Helpfulness Scale, were reversed scored. One item, 2.9, on the Level of Concern Scale was reversed scored. Reverse scoring was strongly disagree (SD) = 5, disagree (D) = 4, neutral (N) = 3, agree (A) = 2 and strongly agree (SA) = 1. The rotated factor loadings for the factor analysis of the 15 item Level of Concern Scale are presented in Table 13 in Chapter IV.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis, a method of data analysis, was used as suggested by Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, and Bent (1975) to determine if “there was some underlying pattern of relationships” (p. 469) in order to rearrange groups of items into components to make “source variables accounting for the observed interrelations in the data” (p. 469). When an item loaded on more than one factor, the item was used on the factor with the highest loading. These items were identified.

A principal components factor analysis with iteration and a varimax orthogonal rotation was used. The varimax rotation was used to simplify the columns of the rotated factor matrix. A listwise deletion was used; items with missing data were not used in the analysis. Only factors that met the Kaiser criterion, accounting for the variance greater than or equal to 1.0, at least one variable (item), were considered as possible factors in the analysis.

Moreover, the criterion for the minimum number of factors was three variables having moderately high loadings on a factor before, according to Thorndike (1975), confidence in its location and interpretation was feasible. The next step was to select the appropriate weights of the factor loadings to be used. The investigator opted to use a conservative approach to ascertain meaningful factor loadings rounded off to .50. Although researchers have used loadings of .30, .40, or .50 as meaningful, a more conservative approach was used. The factors were named on the basis of the items that represented the construct. The correlation matrix was presented for reviewing the relationships among the variables in each of the scales.

Following the factor analysis, scales were constructed and named. As noted previously, reliability was estimated by measuring coefficient alpha on the internal consistency of the scales. Nunnally (1967) reported "coefficient alpha should be obtained first" (p. 210). The rationale for coefficient alpha is that the items are internally consistent (i.e., the items are representative of the same construct). A reliability internal consistency coefficient recommended by Nunnally "of .5 or greater" (p. 226) was deemed suitable for exploratory research analyses. See Table 2.

Factor Loadings on the 20-Item Level of *Helpfulness Scale*

The first factor consisted of three variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The first factor was named "Helpfulness." The three items comprising the helpfulness construct were: (a) SEPAG explain and interpret special education laws, (b) SEPAG help parents understand due process/rights, and (c) SEPAG help parents gain knowledge regarding school placements. The eigenvalue for the first factor was equal to 6.69. The internal consistency of the Helpfulness Scale was $\alpha = .71$.

The second factor consisted of only one variable with a loading rounded to .50 or higher. The factor loading on the item "SEPAG are sensitive to a district's budget constraints in providing special education services" was equal to .70. However, since no other items loaded .50 or higher, this factor did not present an underlying pattern of relationships needed by Thorndike (1975) that could be grouped into components to make "source variables accounting for the observed interrelations in the data" (p. 469). Therefore, factor 2 was not included in the analyses as no reduction of data was realized.

The third factor consisted of four variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The third factor was named "Develop Communication Skills." The four items comprising the Develop Communication Skills were: (a) SEPAG give accurate information, (b) SEPAG provide information and help guide the IEP process, (c) SEPAG support parents' efforts and help in planning long term goals, and (d) SEPAG are sensitive to the power of their role and the trust of parents. The eigenvalue for the third factor was 1.64. The internal consistency of the Develop Communication Skills Scale was $\alpha = .77$.

The fourth factor consisted of three variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The fourth factor was named "Mistrust." The three items comprising the Mistrust construct were: (a) SEPAG promote an environment of mistrust between parents, administrators, and the Child Study Team, (b) SEPAG play into the concerns and fears of parents, (c) SEPAG suggest special education teachers and administrators are uninformed and not trustworthy. The eigenvalue for the fourth factor was equal to 1.45. The internal consistency of the Mistrust Scale was $\alpha = .75$.

The fifth factor consisted of four variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The fifth factor was named "Mediation." The four items comprising the Mediation construct were: (a) SEPAG help prevent and resolve conflicts, (b) SEPAG should sell products and services to parents and schools, (c) SEPAG are useful when communication breaks down, and (d) SEPAG should be used routinely in negotiating special education services. The eigenvalue for the fifth factor was equal to 1.26. The internal consistency of the Mediation Scale was $\alpha = .74$.

Initially, the sixth factor consisted of three variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The sixth factor was named "Resource." The three items comprising the Resource construct were: (a) SEPAG are a reliable source for articles and books on special education, (b) SEPAG provided an ethical and desirable service in selling books, videos and advocacy training, (c) SEPAG are useful when communication breaks down. However, since the item "SEPAG are useful when communication breaks down" loaded higher on the fifth factor, it was included there. Therefore, only two items had unique loadings on the sixth factor; the above factor was not used for analysis since it did not meet the criterion for three variables with moderately high loading on a factor before confidence interpretation is feasible.

Factor Loading on the 15-Item Level of *Concern Scale*

The first factor consisted of three variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The first factor was named "Concern for Development of Communication Skills." The three items composing the Concern for Development of Communication Skills construct were: (a) measures of adequate coursework and professional development, (b) awareness and [keeping] abreast of SEPAG, and (c) [creating] a trusting/collaborative environment. The eigenvalue for the first factor was equal to 2.53. The internal consistency of the Development of Communication Skills Scale was $\alpha = .75$.

The second factor "Issues of Mistrust" consisted of three variables with loadings rounded to .50 or higher. The second construct based on the factor analysis loadings included: (a) current trend to shift to out-of-district experts, (b) SEPAG tend to be anti-

district, and (c) district would welcome the aid of a pro Board Advocacy Group. The eigenvalue for the second factor was 2.32. The internal consistency alpha coefficient was equal to .52.

None of the other factors met the criterion of a minimum of three variables with significant factor loadings in the construct.

A detailed examination of collected responses was discussed in Chapter IV with emphasis on those parts of the survey that addressed the three overarching research questions presented in Chapter I.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter reports the detailed analysis and results of the data obtained from this study in an effort to respond to the three overarching research questions posed in Chapter I. The survey research was designed to explore administrators' use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and to explore administrators' evaluations of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups with regard to their helpfulness in assisting administrators in planning educational programs for special needs youngsters in the New Jersey public schools. The study also explored administrative levels of education and the principal or special education director positions that may impact on their understandings of and concerns for issues in special education and the implementation of policies that effectively promote successful special education programs.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question Number 1: Are Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups used by principals and special education directors in the four counties surveyed?

1a. Does an administrator's district location impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

1b. Does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

1c. Does an administrator's position impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

Research Null Hypothesis 1: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's district location, position and level of education, and the reported usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in the four counties surveyed.

Research Question Number 2: How helpful is the use of Special Education Parents Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students as reported by administrators?

2a. How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs?

2b. How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs?

Research Null Hypothesis 2: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's level of education and position and an administrator's evaluation of the helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups.

Research Question Number 3: What concerns do administrators have regarding the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

3a. How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's level of concern regarding Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability

to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

3b. How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's level of concern regarding Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

Research Null Hypothesis 3: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's level of education and position and an administrator's level of concern regarding the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters.

The collected responses were discussed throughout this chapter with emphasis on those parts of the survey that addressed the research questions. In addition, appropriate tables were included to report statistical data supporting the research findings.

Analysis of the Data

The purpose of the analysis of the data was to answer the research questions by: (a) reporting the frequencies of responses on demographic data, (b) reporting the descriptive statistics of the response data to the Level of Helpfulness and Level of Concern Scales, and by (c) reporting the results of the principal components analysis of the 20-item Likert Scale, Level of Helpfulness, and the 15-item Likert Scale, Level of Concern including the coefficient alpha reliability estimates for the factors and reporting the eigenvalues which determined if the minimum reliability estimates

according to Nunnally (1967) were met for inclusion in the analysis and if the reported eigenvalues met the Kaiser criterion minimum value of 1.00.

Research Question Number 1: Are Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups used by principals and special education directors in the four counties surveyed?

1a. Does an administrator's district location impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

1b. Does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

1c. Does an administrator's position impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

Research Null Hypothesis 1: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's district location, level of education, and position and the reported usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in the four counties surveyed.

Descriptive Statistics of the Frequencies of Response/ Usage

New Jersey has 21 counties. To reiterate, only four northern counties were studied. Among these counties, the frequencies of use of Special Education Advocacy Groups varied. Table 5 reported the frequencies of yes/no responses of 121 participants to the survey's dependent variable usage by administrators in the four counties surveyed. In Bergen County, 14 out of 44 participating administrators reported using SEPAG. In Essex County, 11 out of 30 participating administrators reported using SEPAG. In Morris County, 20 out of 34 participating administrators reported using SEPAG and in Passaic County, 2 out of 13 participating administrators reported using

SEPAG. Thus, a total of 47 out of 121 of the respondents had used SEPAG. It was noted that one participant did not respond to the question. In the usage-by-county Crosstabulation, only Morris County exceeded the expected count (13.2) with 20 (42.6%) of the participants reported having used SEPAG. In Morris County 42.6% of the public school administrators reported a significantly greater use of SEPAG as compared to 29.8% of the administrators in Bergen County; 23.4% of the administrators in Essex County; and 4.3% in Passaic County.

Table 3

Frequency Table: Usage of SEPAG by County

Usage		Bergen	Essex	Morris	Passaic	Total
No	Count	30	19	14	11	74
	Expected Count	26.9	18.3	20.8	8.0	74.0
	% within usage	40.5%	25.7%	18.9%	14.9%	100.0%
	% within county	68.2%	63.3%	41.2%	84.6%	61.2%
	% of Total	24.8%	15.7%	11.6%	9.1%	61.2%
	Residual	3.1	.7	-6.8	3.0	
	Std. Residual	.6	.2	-1.5	1.1	
	Adjusted Residual	1.2	.3	-2.8	1.8	
Yes	Count	14	11	20	2	47
	Expected Count	17.1	11.7	13.2	5.0	47.0
	% within usage	29.8%	23.4%	42.6%	4.3%	100.0%
	% within county	31.8%	36.7%	58.8%	15.4%	38.8%
	% of Total	11.6%	9.1%	16.5%	1.7%	38.8%
	Residual	-3.1	-.7	6.8	-3.0	
	Std. Residual	-.7	-.2	1.9	-1.4	
	Adjusted Residual	-1.2	-.3	2.8	-1.8	
Total	Count	44	30	34	13	121
	Expected Count	44.0	30.0	34.0	13.0	121.0
	% within usage	36.4%	24.8%	28.1%	10.7%	100.0%
	% within county	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	36.4%	24.8%	28.1%	10.7%	100.0%

As reported in Table 4, the Chi-Square Tests yielded the Pearson Chi Square: Value = 9.70, $df = 3$ and the Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) = .021. There was a significant relationship between the reported usage of SEPAG with a respondent's district location. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant relationship between usage of SEPAG and an administrator's location by county was rejected at the .02 level of significance. Morris County administrators, as noted, reported a significantly greater usage of SEPAG than administrators in Bergen, Essex, and Passaic.

Table 4

Chi Square Tests: Usage by County

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.70 ^a	3	.02*
Likelihood Ratio	9.96	3	.02
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.27	1	.04
N of Valid Cases	121		

^a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. the minimum expected count is 5.05

A case processing summary reported that: (a) 22 out of 78 (28%) of the principals and 25 out of 43 (58%) of the special education directors had used SEPAG and that (b) 24 out of 69 (34%) master degreed participants and 23 out of 50 (46%) doctoral participants had used SEPAG. See Table 5.

Table 5

Case Processing Summary: Usage by Highest Degree and Participant's Role

Count		<i>Degrees</i>			<i>Roles</i>		
		Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree	Total	Principal	Special Ed Director	Total
Usage	no	45	27	72	56	18	74
	Yes	24	23	47	22	25	47
Total		69	50	119	78	43	121
% of usage		34%	46%	40%	28%	58%	39%

As reported in Table 6 the Chi Square Tests – Usage by Level of Education – yielded the Pearson Chi Square: Value = 1.53, $df = 1$ and Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) = .22. There was not a significant relationship between the reported usage of SEPAG with a respondent's level of education. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant relationship between usage of SEPAG and administrator's level of education was not rejected at the .05 level of significance.

Table 6

Chi Square Tests: Usage by Level of Education

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.53	1	.22
Likelihood Ratio	1.52	1	.27
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.51	1	.22
N of Valid Cases	119		

0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum count is 19.75.

However, there was a significant relationship between the reported usage of SEPAG with a respondent's position. As reported in Table 7 the Chi-Square Tests yielded the Pearson Chi Square: Value = 10.46, $df = 1$ and Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) = .001. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant relationship between usage of SEPAG and administrator's position was rejected at the .001 level of significance. Special education directors reported a significantly greater use of SEPAG than did principals.

Table 7

Chi Square Tests: Usage by Participants' Role

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.46	1	.001*
Likelihood Ratio	10.40	1	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.37	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	121		

*0 cells (.0% have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16.70.

In summary, the descriptive statistics of the frequencies of responses on the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups suggested that administrators in the surveyed counties of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic had used Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Administrators in Morris County reported a significantly

greater usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups than administrators in the other three counties surveyed. Special education directors reported a significantly greater usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups than did principals.

Descriptive Statistics of the Level of Helpfulness and Level of Concern Scales

In order to answer Research Questions 2 and 3, it was first necessary to report the descriptive statistics of the Level of Helpfulness and Level of Concern Scales and to report the results of the principal component analysis of the two Scales in table format.

Table 8 reports the responses of the 121 participants to the Level of Helpfulness Scale and includes: the frequencies responses of the strongly agree (SA) = 5, agree (A) = 4, neutral (N) = 3, disagree (D) = 2 and strongly disagree (SD) = 1, means and standard deviations. Table 9 reports the responses of the 121 participants to the Level of Concern Scale and includes: the frequencies responses of the strongly agree (SA) = 5, agree (A) = 4, neutral (N) = 3, disagree (D) = 2 and strongly disagree (SD) = 1, means and standard deviations. The rotated factor loadings for the factor analysis of the 20-item Level of Helpfulness Scale are reported in Table 10. The rotated factor loadings for the factor analysis of the 15-item Level of Concern Scale are reported in Table 11.

Table 8

Responses to Level of Helpfulness Scale

Variable #	Variable Name	Frequencies of Responses						M	SD
		SA	A	N	D	SD	N		
01	Give accurate information	10	42	25	19	1	97	3.42	.95
02	Explain & interpret SE laws	10	61	11	14	2	98	3.64	.92
03	Provide info/guide the IEP	4	33	31	24	6	98	3.05	.99
04	Support parent's efforts/long term goals	7	52	25	13	1	98	3.52	.85
05	Promote collaboration bet. CST & par.	1	16	24	34	22	97	2.38	1.05
06	Help parents understand due process/rights	16	58	12	9	3	98	3.76	.94
07	Sensitive to the power of role & trust of par.	11	27	26	29	5	98	3.10	1.10
08	Reliable source for articles & books	7	31	39	14	6	97	3.19	.98
09	Help prevent & resolve conflicts	4	10	30	39	13	96	2.51	.99
10	Ethical & desirable service in selling books/videos	0	19	58	14	7	98	2.90	.79
11	Promote environ. of mistrust bet. par., adm. & CST	5	14	24	35	18	96	2.51	1.11
12	Help parents gain know. re. school placements	7	54	21	12	3	97	3.51	.91
13	Should sell prod. & services to par. & schools	1	8	21	31	35	96	2.05	1.01
14	Refer clients to legal experts in lieu of school experts	6	44	24	13	10	97	3.24	1.09
15	Play into the concerns & fears of parents	4	8	18	45	22	97	2.24	1.03
16	Suggest SE teachers & adm. are not trustworthy	5	11	27	32	21	96	2.44	1.11
17	Sensitive to budget constraints	2	4	11	38	43	98	1.81	.93
18	Thriving business reaping profits	7	17	47	17	10	98	2.93	1.02
19	Useful when communication breaks down	0	21	31	30	16	98	2.58	1.02
20	Should be used routinely in negotiating services	1	7	20	35	35	98	2.02	.97

Table 9

Responses to Level of Concern Scale

Variable #	Variable Name	Frequencies of Responses					M	SD
		SA	A	N	D	SD		
01	Adequate coursework/prof. dev.	56	28	16	14	8	3.90	1.28
02	Aware of & keep abreast of SEPAG	18	55	22	18	9	3.45	1.13
03	Create a trusting/collaborative environ.	47	57	14	0	4	4.20	.77
04	Feel that SE programs are adequately funded	6	17	5	44	49	2.07	1.20
05	Expertise in SE from on-the-job experience	43	47	12	16	4	3.89	1.13
06	Would benefit from pro. dev. in SE law & advocacy	18	54	22	21	7	3.45	1.11
07	District has been involved in SE litigation	25	68	7	12	9	3.72	1.13
08	Admin. of SE requires high level of legal expertise	40	59	15	6	2	4.06	.89
09	Parents appreciate district's concerns re: budgets	23	56	28	12	1	3.73	.91
10	Adm. upfront/give info re: ser. regard. budg. Constraints	47	57	10	5	1	4.20	.83
11	Parents more than district seek advice from SEPAG	63	46	7	2	3	4.34	.86
12	Current trend to shift to out-of-district experts	25	38	32	21	4	3.49	1.11
13	SEPAG tend to be anti-district	24	50	33	11	3	3.67	.98
14	District would welcome aid of pro Board Advocacy Grp.	12	36	53	13	5	3.31	.95
15	District would benefit from establishing own SEPAG	14	48	43	12	2	3.50	.89

Table 10

Rotated Component Matrix for Level of Helpfulness Scale

SEPAG:	1	2	3	4	5	6
Give accurate information	.45	.32	.49	.13	.001	.34
Explain & interpret SE laws	.71	.17	.29	.17	.003	.24
Provide info./guide the IEP process	.47	.37	.52	.25	.11	.13
Support parents efforts/long term goals	.16	-.13	.73	.12	.005	.21
Promote collaboration bet. CST & parents	.27	.43	.30	.45	.40	.13
Help parents understand due process/rights	.74	.11	.28	.006	.15	.21
Are sensitive to power of role and trust of parents	.003	.11	.83	.004	.005	-.004
Reliable source for articles & books on SE	.23	.30	.42	-.11	.007	.67
Help prevent & resolve conflicts	.12	.40	.29	.34	.50	.24
Provide ethical & desirable service in selling books videos & advocacy training	.12	-.009	-.002	.19	.12	.84
Promote and environment of mistrust	.23	-.14	.007	.80	.15	.006
Help parents gain knowledge re: school placements	.74	.001	-.004	.003	-.001	-.003
Should sell products & services to parents & schools	-.48	-.64	-.05	-.006	.83	.12
Refer clients to legal experts in lieu of school experts	.44	-.005	-.19	-.64	.26	-.003
Play into the concerns & fears of parents	.16	.42	.002	.61	.18	.30
Suggest SE teachers & administrators are uninformed & not trustworthy	.24	.52	.006	.55	.16	.002
Sensitive to budget constraints	.009	.70	.18	-.20	.21	-.14
Thriving industry reaping profits	-.004	-.81	.006	-.18	-.0006	-.17
Useful when communication breaks down	.004	.24	.22	.22	.55	.53
Should be used routinely in negotiating services	.14	.23	.008	.11	.74	-.0008

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization a. Rotation converged in 7 iterations

Table 11

Rotated Component Matrix for Level of Concern Scale

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Adequate coursework/prof. devel. to implement effective SE prog.	.80	.005	.002	-.14	.12	-.15
Aware of & keep abreast of activity of SEPAG	.77	.006	-.005	-.13	.14	.002
Create a trusting & collaborative environment	.80	-.004	.003	.21	-.004	.20
Feel that SE programs are adequately funded	-.005	-.001	-.25	.66	-.007	.004
Gained expertise in SE from on-the-job experience	.003	.002	-.002	.0002	-.002	.92
Would benefit from prof. dev. in SE law & advocacy	-.51	-.25	-.001	-.34	.45	.17
District has been involved in SE litigation	-.22	.17	.49	-.27	.007	-.14
Administration of SE requires high level of legal expertise	-.005	.166	.78	.0001	-.006	.008
Parents appreciate districts concerns re: budgets	-.006	-.22	.22	.74	.18	-.005
Adm. are upfront/give info. re: ser. regardless of bud. concerns	.29	-.32	.74	.005	.005	-.006
Parents more than districts seek advice from SEPAG	.32	.17	.16	-.28	.53	-.20
Current trend to shift to out-of-district experts	.15	.73	-.004	-.008	.14	-.11
SEPAG tend to be anti-district	.19	.55	.21	-.29	-.27	-.15
District would welcome aid of pro Board Advocacy Group	-.15	.73	.005	.001	.18	.26
District would benefit from establishing own SEPAG	.13	.21	-.007	.38	.69	.004

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

a. Rotation converged in 25 iterations

Reported Results of the Principal Components Analysis

The four subscales: Helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, Develop Better Communication Skills, Promote Mistrust, and Mediation for the Level of Helpfulness Scale and two subscales: Concern for Better Communication Skills and Concern for Issues of Mistrust for the Level of Concern Scale were used to address the research questions. These subscales generated by the factor analysis to measure the administrators' evaluations of SEPAG were compared to the administrator's level of education either (a) a Master's degree or less or (b) a doctoral degree and administrator's role or either (a) principal or (b) special education director. Respondents were compared on each of the six dependent measures. Since there were only two administrators with a four year college degree, these administrators were included under a Master's category. Since there were only five respondents with an advanced degree other than a doctoral degree, these respondents were included under the advanced category. The descriptive statistics of Level of Helpfulness and Level of Concern Scales by Participant's Degree and by Participant's Role are reported in Tables 12 and 13.

Research Question 2: How helpful is the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students as reported by administrators?

2a. How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs?

Table 12

Descriptive Statistics for Level of Helpfulness of SEPAG and Level of Concern Scales by Level of Degree

Level of Helpfulness/ Level of Concern Scales

Helpfulness Subscales		<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 Helpfulness of SEPAG	Master's Degree	55	11.25	1.62
	Doctoral Degree	42	10.57	2.74
	Total	97	10.96	2.19
2 Develop Better Communication Skills	Master's Degree	56	13.28	2.79
	Doctoral Degree	41	12.80	3.31
	Total	97	13.07	3.01
3 Promote Mistrust	Master's Degree	54	7.69	2.63
	Doctoral Degree	39	6.36	2.49
	Total	93	7.13	2.64
4 Mediation	Master's Degree	54	9.70	3.16
	Doctoral Degree	41	8.51	2.68
	Total	95	9.19	3.01
Concern Subscales				
1 Concern for Better Communication Skills	Master's Degree	70	11.63	2.67
	Doctoral Degree	50	11.56	2.63
	Total	120	11.60	2.64
2 Concern for Issues of Mistrust	Master's Degree	67	10.23	2.05
	Doctoral Degree	50	10.86	2.31
	Total	117	10.50	2.18

Table 13

Descriptive Statistics for Level of Helpfulness of SEPAG and Level of Concern Scales by Participant's Role

Level of Helpfulness/Level of Concern Scales

Helpfulness Subscales		<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 Helpfulness of SEPAG	Principal	58	11.43	2.16
	Special Education Dir	39	10.26	2.07
	Total	97	10.97	2.19
2 Develop Better Communication Skills	Principal	59	13.86	2.97
	Special Education Dir	38	11.84	2.71
	Total	97	13.07	3.02
3 Promote Mistrust	Principal	56	7.46	2.70
	Special Education Dir	37	6.62	2.49
	Total	93	7.13	2.64
4 Mediation	Principal	58	10.09	2.79
	Special Education	37	7.78	2.83
	Dir	95	9.19	3.01
	Total			
Concern Subscales				
1 Concern for Better Communication Skills	Principal	78	10.70	2.77
	Special Education Dir	44	13.07	1.56
	Total	122	11.56	2.65
2 Concern for Issues of Mistrust	Principal	76	10.03	1.83
	Special Education Dir	42	11.36	2.49
	Total	118	10.50	2.17

Research Question 2b. How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs?

Research Null Hypothesis 2a: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's level of education and position and an administrator's evaluation of the helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups.

Two-way ANOVA - Level of Education by Participant's Role

In order to determine if there were significant differences between respondents with Master's level degrees (including two, four-year level degrees) and respondents with advanced level degrees (Ph.D., Ed.D., Ed.S., and J.D. degrees), and principals and special education directors on the dependent measures Helpfulness of SEPAG, Develop Better Communication Skills, Promote Mistrust, Mediation, Concern for Better Communication Skills and Concern for Issues of Mistrust, a two-way factorial analysis of variance design was used.

On the first subscale, Helpfulness of SEPAG, there was no significant mean difference between respondents with more advanced degrees ($M = 12.42$, $SD = 3.34$) and the respondents with less advanced degrees ($M = 13$, $SD = 2.98$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 97$, $F = .271$, $p = .60$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean differences due to educational level was, therefore, accepted.

However, for the Helpfulness of SEPAG subscale there was a significant mean difference between respondents who were principals ($M = 13.59$, $SD = 3.07$) and the special education directors ($M = 11.45$, $SD = 2.85$) beyond the .05 level of significance,

$df = 97$, $F = 10.98$, $p = .001$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Helpfulness of SEPAG difference due to administrator's role was, therefore, rejected as the principals reported a significantly greater perception of helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups than did special education directors.

Descriptive statistics for Helpfulness of SEPAG subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education are reported in Table 14.

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics for Helpfulness of SEPAG Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

<i>Dependent Variable: Helpfulness of SEPAG Subscale</i>				
Participant's Role	Highest Degree	Mean	SD	N
Principal	Master's Degree	13.70	2.78	37
	Doctoral Degree	13.41	3.58	22
	Total	13.59	3.07	59
Special Education Director	Master's Degree	11.63	2.94	19
	Doctoral Degree	11.26	2.82	19
	Total	11.44	2.85	38
Total	Master's Degree	13.00	2.98	56
	Doctoral Degree	12.41	3.40	41
	Total	12.75	3.15	97

The two-way ANOVA for the dependent measure, Helpfulness of SEPAG subscale, by role and level of education, and including the F ratio statistics are reported in Table 15.

Table 15

Two-way ANOVA Source Table for Helpfulness of SEPAG Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Helpfulness of SEPAG Subscale

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Corrected Model	108.909	3	36.303	3.985	.010
Intercept	14068.789	1	14068.789	1544.464	.000
Role	100.051	1	100.051	10.984*	.001
Level of Education	2.466	1	2.466	.271	.604
Role*Level of Education	3.149E-02	1	3.149E-02	.003	.953
Error	847.153	93	9.109		
Total	16731.000	97			
Corrected Total	956.062	96			

a. R Squared = .114 (Adjusted R Squared = .085)
* $p \leq .05$

The second subscale, Develop Better Communication Skills, yielded no significant mean difference between the respondents with more advanced degrees ($M = 12.80$, $SD = 3.3$) and the lower degreed respondents ($M = 13.26$, $SD = 2.80$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 97$, $F = .106$, $p = .75$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Development Better Communication Skills difference due to level of degree was, therefore, accepted.

Nevertheless, on this second subscale, Develop Better Communication Skills, there was a significant mean difference between respondents who were principals ($M = 13.90$, $SD = 2.96$) and who were special education directors ($M = 11.84$, $SD = 2.71$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 97$, $F = 10.62$, $p = .002$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Develop Better Communication Skills difference due to administrator's role was, therefore, rejected as the principals reported a significantly greater perception of the need to develop better communication skills than did the special education directors.

Descriptive statistics for Develop Better Communication subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education are reported in Table 16. The two-way ANOVA for the Develop Better Communication Skills subscale, by role and level of education, and including the F ratio statistics are reported in Table 17.

Regarding Promote Mistrust or the third subscale, respondents with more advanced degrees had a significantly higher Promote Mistrust subscale score ($M = 11.64$, $SD = 2.49$) than the Promote Mistrust score for the respondents with less advanced degrees ($M = 10.31$, $SD = 2.63$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 93$, $F = 4.58$, $p = .04$. The null hypothesis was rejected as the respondents with more advanced degrees, had a higher level of Mistrust for SEPAG.

Table 16

Descriptive Statistics for Develop Better Communication Skills Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Develop Better Communication Skills Subscale

Participant's Role	Highest Degree	Mean	SD	N
Principal	Master's Degree	13.97	2.55	37
	Doctoral Degree	13.68	3.60	22
	Total	13.86	2.96	59
Special Education Director	Master's Degree	11.89	2.79	19
	Doctoral Degree	11.79	2.70	19
	Total	11.84	2.70	38
Total	Master's Degree	13.27	2.79	56
	Doctoral Degree	12.80	3.31	41
	Total	12.07	3.01	97

In contrast, for the Promote Mistrust subscale there was no significant mean difference between respondents who were principals ($M=10.54$, $SD = 2.70$) and those who were special education directors ($M= 11.38$, $SD = 2.49$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 93$, $F = 1.27$, $p = .26$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Promote Mistrust difference due to administrator's role was, therefore, accepted.

Table 17

Two-way ANOVA Source Table for Develop Better Communication Skills Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Develop Better Communication Skills Subscale

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	95.802	3	31.934	3.824	.012
Intercept	14828.530	1	14828.530	1775.545	.000
Role	88.697	1	88.697	10.620*	.002
Level of Education	.884	1	.884	.106	.746
Role*Level of Education	.194	1	.194	.023	.879
Error	776.603	93	8.352		
Total	17448.000	97			
Corrected Total	872.495	96			

a. R Squared = .110 (Adjusted R Squared = .081)

* $p \leq .05$

Descriptive Statistics for Promote Mistrust subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education are reported in Table 18. The two-way ANOVA for the level of Promote Mistrust subscale by role and level of education, and including the F ratio statistics are reported in Table 19.

Table 18

Descriptive Statistics for Promote Mistrust Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Promote Mistrust Subscale

Participant's Role	Highest Degree	Mean	SD	N
Principal	Master's Degree	10.28	2.68	36
	Doctoral Degree	11.45	2.56	20
	Total	10.54	2.70	56
Special Education Director	Master's Degree	10.89	2.50	18
	Doctoral Degree	11.84	2.46	19
	Total	11.39	2.49	37
Total	Master's Degree	10.31	2.63	54
	Doctoral Degree	11.64	2.49	39
	Total	10.87	2.64	93

For the Mediation subscale there was no significant mean difference between the respondents with more advanced degrees ($M = 11.90$, $SD = 2.65$) and the respondents with less advanced degrees ($M = 13.01$, $SD = 3.24$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 94$, $F = 2.55$, $p = .114$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Mediation difference due to level of degree was, therefore, accepted.

However, on this fourth subscale, Mediation, there was a significant mean difference between the respondents who were principals ($M = 13.34$, $SD = 2.84$) and those who were special education directors ($M = 11.22$, $SD = 2.91$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 94$, $F = 11.12$, $p = .001$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Mediation difference due to administrator's role was, therefore, rejected as the

principals reported a significantly greater perception of the need for mediation than did special education directors.

Table 19

Two-way ANOVA Source Table for Promote Mistrust Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Promote Mistrust Subscale

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	50.225	3	16.742	2.524	.063
Intercept	10509.593	1	10509.593	1584.737	.000
Role	8.445	1	8.445	1.273	.262
Level of Education	30.343	1	30.343	4.575*	.035
Role*Level of Education	1.183	1	1.183	.178	.674
Error	590.226	89	6.632		
Total	11631.000	93			
Corrected Total	640.452	96			

a. R Squared = .78 (Adjusted R Squared = .047)

* $p \leq .05$

Descriptive Statistics for Mediation subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education are reported in Table 20. The two-way ANOVA for the Mediation subscale by Role and Level of Education, and including the F ratio statistics are reported in Table 21.

Table 20

Descriptive Statistics for Mediation Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Mediation Subscale

Participant's Role	Highest Degree	Mean	SD	N
Principal	Master's Degree	13.44	3.14	36
	Doctoral Degree	13.18	2.34	22
	Total	13.34	2.84	58
Special Education Director	Master's Degree	12.12	3.39	17
	Doctoral Degree	10.42	2.21	19
	Total	11.22	2.92	36
Total	Master's Degree	13.02	3.25	53
	Doctoral Degree	11.90	2.65	41
	Total	12.53	3.04	94

Research Question Number 3: What concerns do administrators have regarding the helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students?

3a. How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's level of concern regarding Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and their ability

to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

Table 21

Two-way ANOVA Source Table for Mediation Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Mediation Subscale

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	126.846	3	42.282	5.195	.002
Intercept	13088.024	1	13088.024	1607.958	.000
Role	90.467	1	90.467	11.115*	.001
Level of Education	20.784	1	20.784	2.553	.114
Role*Level of Education	11.134	1	11.134	1.368	.245
Error	732.558	90	8.140		
Total	15622.000	94			
Corrected Total	859.404	93			

a. R Squared = .148 (Adjusted R Squared = .119)

* $p \leq .05$

Research Question 3b. How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's level of concern regarding Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups

and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

Research Null Hypothesis 3: There are no statistically significant differences between an administrator's level of education and an administrator's position and an administrator's level of concern regarding the uses of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters.

The fifth subscale, Concern for Better Communication Skills subscale, yielded no significant mean difference between the respondents with more advanced degrees ($M = 11.56, SD = 2.63$) and the lower degreed respondents ($M = 11.62, SD = 2.67$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 120, F = .342, p = .56$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Concern for Better Communication Skills difference due to level of degree was, therefore, accepted.

In contrast, on the Concern for Better Communication Skills subscale there was a significant mean difference between the respondents who were principals, ($M = 10.75, SD = 2.77$) and the respondents who were special education directors ($M = 13.07, SD = 1.56$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 120, F = 25.7, p = .000$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Concern for Better Communication Skills difference due to administrator's role was, therefore, rejected as the special education directors reported a significantly greater perception of the need for better communication skills.

Descriptive Statistics for Concern for Better Communication subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education are reported in Table 22. The two-way

ANOVA for the Concern for Better Communication Skills Subscale by role and level of education, and including the F ratio statistics are reported in Table 23.

Table 22

Descriptive Statistics for Concern for Better Communication Skills Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Concern for Better Communication Skills Subscale

Participant's Role	Highest Degree	Mean	SD	N
Principal	Master's Degree	10.87	2.77	47
	Doctoral Degree	10.55	2.84	29
	Total	10.75	2.77	76
Special Education Director	Master's Degree	13.17	1.67	23
	Doctoral Degree	12.95	1.47	21
	Total	13.07	1.56	44
Total	Master's Degree	11.63	2.67	70
	Doctoral Degree	11.56	2.63	50
	Total	11.60	2.64	120

Concern for Issues of Mistrust, the sixth subscale, revealed a significant mean difference between the respondents who were principals ($M = 10.03$, $SD = 1.84$) and those who were special education directors ($M = 11.36$, $SD = 2.49$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 117$, $F = 11.37$, $p = .001$. The null hypothesis of no significant mean Concern for Issues of Mistrust difference due to administrator's role was, therefore, rejected as the special education directors reported a significantly greater perception for concern about issues of mistrust than did principals. Descriptive Statistics

for Concern for Issues of Mistrust by Participant's Role and Level of Education are reported in Table 24.

Table 23

Two-way ANOVA Source Table for Concern for Better Communication Skills Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Concern for Better Communication Skills Subscale

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	152.137	3	50.712	8.668	.000
Intercept	15396.214	1	15396.214	2631.586	.000
Role	150.562	1	150.562	25.735*	.000
Level of Education	2.001	1	2.001	.342	.560
Role*Level of Education	6.685E-02	1	6.85E-02	.011	.915
Error	678.663	116	5.851		
Total	16978.000	120			
Corrected Total	830.800	119			

a. R Squared = .183 (Adjusted R Squared = .162)

* $p \leq .05$

Table 24

*Descriptive Statistics for Concern for Issues of Mistrust Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education**Dependent Variable: Concern for Issues of Mistrust Subscale*

Participant's Role	Highest Degree	Mean	SD	N
Principal	Master's Degree	10.09	1.77	46
	Doctoral Degree	9.93	1.96	29
	Total	10.03	1.84	75
Special Education Director	Master's Degree	10.57	2.58	21
	Doctoral Degree	12.14	2.17	21
	Total	11.36	2.49	42
Total	Master's Degree	10.24	2.05	67
	Doctoral Degree	10.86	2.31	50
	Total	10.50	2.18	117

Additionally, on the Concerns for Issues of Mistrust subscale there were significant mean differences between the special education directors with more advanced degrees ($M = 12.14$, $SD = 2.17$) and the principals with more advanced degrees ($M = 9.93$, $SD = 1.96$) beyond the .05 level of significance, $df = 1, 117$, $F = 4.67$, $p = .03$. Advanced level degreed special education directors reported a greater Concern for Issues of Mistrust than did advanced level degreed principals. The null hypothesis of no significant Concern for Issues of Mistrust difference due to level of degree was, therefore, rejected. Table 25 reports the two-way ANOVA for the Concern for Issues of Mistrust subscale by role and level of education and including the F ratio statistics.

Table 25

Two-way ANOVA Source Table for Concern for Issues of Mistrust Subscale by Participant's Role and Level of Education

Dependent Variable: Concern for Issues of Mistrust Subscale

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	74.019	3	24.673	5.842	.001
Intercept	12056.303	1	12056.303	2854.738	.000
Role	48.000	1	48.000	11.366*	.001
Level of Education	13.229	1	13.229	3.132	.079
Role*Level of Education	19.700	1	19.700	4.665*	.033
Error	477.229	113	4.223		
Total	13461.000	117			
Corrected Total	551.248	116			

a. R Squared = .134 (Adjusted R Squared = .111)

* $p \leq .05$

Since the interaction effect was also significant, the simple mean effects were computed to determine the causes of the interaction. An examination of the cells indicated there was an ordinal interaction (i.e., the doctoral level special education directors had higher mean scores for issues of mistrust).

The least significant difference comparisons of the simple main effects indicated the mean score for the doctoral level special education directors, ($M = 12.14$) was significantly greater than the mean score for the doctoral level school principals ($M = 9.93$) beyond the .05 level, as the mean difference of 2.21 was greater than the computed criterion level of 1.16 to reject the null hypothesis.

In a like manner the doctoral level special education directors had significantly higher sensitivity to issues of Mistrust than the master level special education directors ($M = 10.57$) beyond the computed criterion level of 1.24 to reject the null hypothesis. The criterion levels were based on multiplying the t-score of 1.96 x the square root of the mean square error (sum of $1/\text{sample 1} = 1/\text{sample 2}$).

Summary of the Findings

The following frequencies were reported. Thirty-eight percent or 47 out of 121 respondents reported having used SEPAG. Twenty-eight percent or 22 out of 78 principals participating and 58% or 25 out of 43 special education directors participating reported having used SEPAG. Thirty-four percent or 24 out of 69 master degreed participants and 46% or 23 out of 50 doctoral participants had used SEPAG. Of the four counties surveyed, only Morris County exceeded their expected count of 13.2 with 58% or 20 out of 34 participants reporting having used SEPAG.

The factor analysis generated six dependent measures: four subscales - Helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, Develop Better Communication Skills, Promote Mistrust, and Mediation on the Level of Helpfulness Scale and two subscales - Concern for Better Communication Skills and Concern for

Issues of Mistrust on the Level of Concern Scale. These measures satisfied (a) a minimum of three items with factor loadings rounded to .50 or greater, (b) the Kaiser Criteria, and (c) inter-item consistency coefficient greater than .50. The six derived subscales were composed of the respondents' level of education and role. The null hypothesis was set at the .05, .01, and .001 levels.

Several hypotheses were tested for significant differences between specific independent and dependent variables. A number of statistically significant differences were observed.

Administrators in Morris County reported a significantly greater use of SEPAG than did administrators in Bergen, Essex, and Passaic Counties. Special education directors reported a significantly greater use of SEPAG than did principals.

The higher level degreed administrators were significantly more mistrustful of SEPAG than the administrators with a Master's degree or a Bachelor's degree. Principals reported a significantly greater evaluation of helpfulness of SEPAG than special education directors. Principals also reported a significantly greater perception of the need to develop better communication skills and for the use of mediation in special education than did special education directors.

In contrast, special education directors reported significantly greater concerns for better communication skills and issues of trust than did principals. Doctoral degreed special education directors also reported a significantly greater concern for issues of trust than did doctoral degreed principals or master degreed principals and master degreed special education directors.

CHAPTER V

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter serves to summarize the results of the research, support the conclusions with information from the review of literature, and make recommendations for future research. The purpose of the research was to survey administrators' use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and to elicit their evaluations of the helpfulness of Special Education Advocacy Groups in assisting administrators in providing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters in their districts.

Additionally, the research explored administrative education levels and the principal and special education director positions that may impact on administrators' understandings of special education laws and issues, as well as administrators' abilities to effectively promote successful special education programs.

This is an important area for study. New Jersey's public schools have embraced special education and in particular, the inclusion model that has led the way for adapting regular education classrooms to serve special education youngsters. Modifications and accommodations for special needs students are designed with the goal to provide appropriate related services to special needs youngsters and to educate them alongside their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive learning environment. According to Goodman (2004), "These services can be very important in helping children and youth with disabilities develop, learn, and succeed in school and other settings" (p.1).

Nevertheless, special education is not easily administered in New Jersey's public schools for a number of reasons. Special education is not fully funded by the federal government and inclusive practices and expensive intervention treatments tailored to a student's unique needs are not easily financed by school districts.

Administrators, who ideally have the best interests of all students at heart and cognizant of district budget limitations, may struggle to fulfill every request made by their Child Study Team members and parents of children with special needs. At times, difficult decisions must be made regarding the number of and kinds of related services to include in a student's IEP.

When an administrator's decision is at odds with the parents' request, conflict may arise and may result in parents seeking redress from out-of-district resources. Some parents seek legal counsel and some utilize the resources of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Regardless of venue, when a parent decides to go out-of-district for assistance to garner the IEP they deem acceptable, it is clear that the trust in the local administrator to meet their child's needs has eroded. Unfortunately, not all attorneys and Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups fully understand school budget constraints and are not necessarily pro the school district. Furthermore, when parents pay for outside counsel and advocacy, districts are forced to do the same. In effect, educational planning becomes fraught with litigious undertones and attention and money is taken away from the business at hand: educating the special needs child.

In addition, busy administrators challenged with a myriad of duties to include special education, might also find it difficult to keep abreast of federal mandates and special education laws and policies that are less than static and, at times, contradictory.

Not to do so may result in an administrator being cited for non-compliance with the laws that govern special education programs and in contention with parental requests.

The courts agree that special needs students are entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) that is reasonable and akin to that of regular education students. However, a clear definition of "appropriate" has never been provided. According to LaMorte (2002), optimal gain is not the goal as indicated in the Rowley decision that ruled that schools need only provide sufficient services to "permit the child to benefit educationally" (p. 330). Yet, some parents who verse themselves in the law through access to the resources of Special Education Advocacy Groups are more often requesting services and interventions that appear to promise their children optimal educational gains. In this regard, administrators must ferret out unreasonable requests and as indicated by LaMorte, follow the two-prong test of the Rowley decision to comply with the procedures of IDEA; and develop IEPs that follow standard procedures and that are reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits. At the same time, according to Yell and Drasgow (2000), they must also know that in most recent FAPE cases, the courts have begun to rule that the law's FAPE requirement goes beyond mere access to a minimal education. The courts have suggested that special needs youngsters are to receive a meaningful education that is consistent with a student's overall ability and that can be measurably assessed in terms of a student's yearly progress. Once again, the definition of meaningful is up for interpretation. More and more courts are beginning to interpret the Rowley decision on a case-by-case basis. The law is not stagnant and school districts must stay current in order not to be rendered non-compliant with the law.

Consequently, administrators might consider availing themselves of and studying court rulings in the area of special education. Additionally, administrators must work diligently to garner the trust of the parents of special needs students. In order to do so, administrators could reflect upon their own understanding of special education laws and their own preparation for interpreting special education laws. Armed with this knowledge administrators might be more likely to design and implement effective special education programs that avoid litigation and promote collaboration and trust between parents and school districts.

Additionally, administrators might become aware of and be willing to access the same resources that parents of special education youngsters are increasingly employing to assist them in negotiating their child's IEPs. These resources include the hundreds of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups that permeate the Internet and advise parents to vociferously challenge administrators to provide related services and customized IEPs to address the special needs of their youngsters.

The Purpose of the Research

The design of this study intended to explore administrators' use and evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in assisting administrators in planning and implementing special education programs. It was also hoped that administrators who participated would have the opportunity to not only reflect on the usefulness of SEPAG but also to review their own preparation for addressing the concerns of special education parents and for comprehending special education laws. The study also examined district location and administrative education levels and the principal and

special education director positions that may impact on administrators' understandings of special education laws and issues and their abilities to effectively promote successful special education programs.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1: Report of Use of SEPAG

This chapter follows the three overarching research questions presented in Chapter I. The first question polled the *use* of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups by principals and special education directors in the four counties of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic.

As indicated by the results, Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups are used by administrators in four counties surveyed. Forty-seven of the 121 (39%) of the respondents reported having used SEPAG. In Bergen County, 14 out of 44 (29.8%) of the participating administrators reported using SEPAG. In Essex County 11 out of 30 (23.4 %) of the participating administrators reported using SEPAG. In Morris County, 20 out of 34 (42.6%) of the participating administrators reported using SEPAG and in Passaic County, 2 out of 13 (4.3%) of the participating administrators reported using Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. It was noted that there was difficulty in linking relevant research to this finding due to the paucity of research into the use and evaluation of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups.

Nevertheless, these results begged the next question: Does an administrator's district location impact an administrator's usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups? In a usage-by-county crosstabulation, only Morris County administrators exceeded the expected count (13.2) with 20 (42.6%) of the participants reported having

used Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Thus, there was a significant relationship between the reported use of SEPAG with a respondent's district location.

Morris County consists of a number of school districts that are comprised of affluent populations. Additionally, in Bergen County, another affluent New Jersey county, administrators reported a 29.8% usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Zirkel (2002) noted that northern New Jersey's most affluent districts are involved more and more in special education litigation. It may be that the financial ability exists in these areas to access attorneys and the services of out-of-district-support groups. Informed administrators may also access these groups in order to equal the playing field between the school district and parents when it comes to negotiating an appropriate IEP.

The research also explored the questions: (a) Does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups? and (b) Does an administrator's position impact an administrator's use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

Although twenty-four out of 69 (34%) master degreed participants and 23 out of 50 (46%) doctoral participants had used Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, there was not a significant relationship between the reported usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups with a respondent's level of education. However, there was a significant relation between the reported usage of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups with a respondent's position. A case processing summary reported that 22 out of 78 (28%) of the principals and 25 out of 43 (58%) of the special education directors had used SEPAG. Special education directors reported a significantly greater use of Special

Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Once again the paucity of literature in this area does not offer a link to the preponderance of special education directors using these groups. Nevertheless, it may be inferred that due to their specific training in the field of special education and advocacy, special education directors might more readily avail themselves of the considerable resources of advocacy groups.

In summary, administrators in the surveyed counties of Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Passaic had used Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Administrators in Morris County reported a significantly greater use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups than administrators in the other three counties surveyed. Special education directors reported a significantly greater use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups than did principals.

Research Question 2: Evaluation of the Helpfulness of SEPAG

The second overarching question in the research inquired: How *helpful* is the use of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students as reported by administrators? Embedded in this question was the query: How does an administrator's level of education impact an administrator's evaluation of the helpfulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups?

The 39 respondents with the more advanced levels of education (doctorate, M.D., J.D., Ed.S.) appeared more likely to report that Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups promoted a level of mistrust between parents and school administrators than the 54 respondents with the less advanced degrees (Master's and

baccalaureate). There was a significant difference for the Helpfulness of SEPAG Scale regarding the Promote Mistrust subscale. The Promote Mistrust subscale was comprised of three variables:

1. SEPAG promote an environment of mistrust between parents, administrators, and Child Study Team Members.
2. SEPAG play into the concerns and fears of parents of special needs youngsters.
3. SEPAG suggest that special education teachers and administrators are uninformed and not trustworthy.

These findings, although not supported specifically in the review of literature, may be supported from some of the offerings posted on the sites of some advocacy groups. One Special Education Parent Advocacy Group, Reed Martin J.D. Special Education Law & Advocacy (2002) presents itself as a website “where parents, advocates, attorneys and school personnel come for accurate answers to questions with strategies to secure [their] child’s legal rights” (p. 1). It advertises manuals for purchase to include “Section 504” How You Can Use It to Get Your Child What They Need and Advanced Advocacy Strategies: Are You Ready to Play Hardball? These titles might be viewed as inflammatory and imply that school districts are not being upfront and therefore not trustworthy in terms of their delivery of special education services.

Wrightslaw Associates (2002), another very popular site, is comprehensive in the information it presents, yet it appears to promote mistrust of school administrators. According to the Wrightslaw, advocacy is a vital service since:

Good special education services are intensive and expensive. Resources are limited. If you have a child with special needs, you may wind up battling the school district for the services your child needs. To prevail, you need information skills and tools. (p. 1)

In the literature Kluth, Villa and Thousand (2002), addressed the issue of mistrust regarding the delivery of special education programs and suggested that administrators need to understand their responsibilities under the IDEA. In doing so they should consider the need for additional training. Administrators, who commit to educating themselves in the issues of special education, enhance the quality of special education programs in their districts and diminish the levels of mistrust created by an inability to articulate the quality of a district's program to parents and special education advocates. Informed administrators may also be more aware and wary of outside influences to include adversarial SEPAG that might erode parental confidence in the school's IEP process. Thus, Kluth's research may be viewed as support for the finding that the more advanced degree respondents reported a higher level of mistrust of SEPAG than did the less degreed participants. However, caution is noted since the data does not allow the conclusion that advanced levels of education guarantee better interpretation of special education laws.

On the Helpfulness of SEPAG subscale, the Develop Better Communication Skills subscale, and on the Mediation subscale, there were no significant mean differences between the respondents with more advanced degrees and the respondents with Master's and baccalaureate degrees. Significant mean differences were noted only for the third subscale, Promote Mistrust, as reported with the more advanced degreed

respondents reporting a higher level of mistrust than respondents with the less advanced degree.

A second embedded question regarding the evaluation of SEPAG asked: How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's evaluation of the helpfulness of SEPAG and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs? On the Helpfulness of SEPAG subscale, the Develop Better Communication Skills subscale, and the Mediation subscale, there were significant mean differences between the respondents who were principals and those who were special education directors.

The Helpfulness of SEPAG subscale was comprised of three variables:

1. SEPAG explain and interpret special education laws for parents.
2. SEPAG help parents to understand due process and their rights under IDEA and Statute 504.
3. SEPAG help parents to gain knowledge and experience regarding school placements, programs, resources, and legal obligations.

The Develop Communication Skills subscale was comprised of three variables:

1. SEPAG provide valuable information to help guide the evaluation/IEP process.
2. SEPAG support parents' efforts in developing plans for long term goals.
3. SEPAG are sensitive to the power of their roles and the trust parents place in them.

The Mediation subscale was comprised of four variables:

1. SEPAG support parents, educators, and administrators in assessing information to help prevent and resolve conflicts.
2. SEPAG should be in the business of selling products and services to parents and schools.
3. SEPAG are useful when communication breaks down between parents and school personnel.
4. SEPAG should be used routinely in negotiating services for special needs youngsters in the public school setting.

Principals reported a significantly greater perception of the helpfulness of SEPAG. The variables above indicated that principals agreed that SEPAG can assist in helping to develop communication skills and in providing information that can be useful when communication breaks down. Therefore, the role of principal appears to make the administrator more accepting of information provided by SEPAG and the need to emphasize good communication and the desirability to use mediation in order to effectively implement special education services and programs. SEPAG may indeed offer a venue for accessing information that teaches good communication skills and mediation practices.

According to Patterson, Bowling, and Mashall (2000), special education and regular education teachers believe that without the support of the principal, their efforts fall short. Additionally, they noted that informed principals are viewed as key to successful policy implementation and serve the school community best when they choose "to take an active role in the process of delivering special education programs by gaining knowledge of the intricacies of special education services and regulations and by keeping abreast of trends and changes in the field" (p. 16).

Bollero (2001) suggested that principals and special education directors should become adept in the practice of principled bargaining familiar to most negotiators in the sector of collective bargaining. Bollero also reported that participants in the IEP meetings should utilize the tenets of mediation to: (a) help sustain relationships, (b) keep the focus on the child's need, not the district's resources or the parent's expectation, (c) identify specific, measurable, realistic goals, and (d) acknowledge the reality of the district's limited resources, and have a back up plan out of a potential dilemma (p. 8).

Bar-Lev, Neustadt, and Peter (2002) also cited the advantages of the use of mediation to avoid a due process hearing. This advantage would appeal to the principal, who in the district's best interest, would seek to avoid litigation costs. According to Bar-Lev and colleagues, "Mediation is less expensive than due process...typically costs do not exceed \$1500" and "Mediation encourages creative solutions because the perspective is broader than that in due process allowing both parties to 'step outside of the legal box'" (pp. 2-4).

On the Promote Mistrust subscale, there was no significant mean difference between the respondents who were principals and those who were special education directors.

Research Question 3: Concerns Regarding the Helpfulness of SEPAG

The third overarching question posed in the study was: What concerns do administrators have regarding the helpfulness of SEPAG in promoting appropriate IEPs for special education students? Embedded in this question is the query: How does an

administrator's level of education impact an administrator's level of concern regarding SEPAG and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

For the Concern for Better Communication Skills subscale, there were no significant mean differences between the respondents with more advanced degrees and the respondents with Master's and baccalaureate degrees. However, there was a significant difference noted in the interaction between role and level of education with the special education directors who had doctoral degrees, reporting a higher level of concern for issues of mistrust than the doctoral degreed principals in the evaluation of the helpfulness of SEPAG.

Tryneski (as cited in Patterson et. al., 2002) reported that despite the perceived need for on-going professional education for administrators in the area of special education, few states require principals to demonstrate their competence or to take courses in the area of special education. Tryneski reported that "only Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Maine, and Missouri require that principals complete some level of professional development to administer special education programs" (p. 17).

This information would tend to support the concerns that more highly educated special education directors, specifically trained in their field, might have if their principals did not share their understandings/concerns. With regard to concerns for issues of mistrust advanced leveled special education directors may anticipate the potential use of out-of-district advocacy resources and may have more knowledge of their platforms that may promote parents' mistrust of the local school district.

Advanced training in special education areas for special education directors and not for principals, although relevant to the effective administration of the system, would not guarantee that all administrators would share identical concerns regarding services for special education populations or views of SEPAG. Principals and special education directors who were at odds in terms of their understandings of special education policies and procedures and resources would have the potential to communicate these differences to parents and contribute to an environment of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and mistrust.

Thus, there may be a need for revisions of the advanced educational training programs to incorporate required courses to help all administrators understand the complexity of concerns (to include establishing an environment of trust) germane to educating handicapped children.

Embedded also in the third research question regarding the evaluation of the helpfulness of SEPAG was the question: How does an administrator's position impact an administrator's level of concern regarding SEPAG and their ability to assist administrators in implementing effective special education programs for special needs youngsters?

On the Concern for Better Communication Skills subscale, and on the Concern for Issues of Mistrust subscale, there were significant mean differences between principals and special education directors. The Concern for Better Communication Skills subscale was comprised of three variables:

1. I [the administrator] have had adequate coursework/professional development in the area of special education to effectively inform and direct the district's special education program.

2. I [the administrator] am aware of and have kept abreast of the activities of SEPAG.

3. I [the administrator] am able to create a trusting, collaborative environment in negotiating special education services with parents of special needs students.

The Concern for Issues of Mistrust subscale was comprised of three variables:

1. There is a current trend to shift from looking at the Child Study Team as the experts to looking to experts outside the district.

2. SEPAG tend to be anti-district.

3. My [the administrator's] district would welcome the aid of a pro Board (of Education) Advocacy Group in the area of Special Education.

Special education directors reported a significantly greater perception of Concern for Better Communication Skills and for Concern for Issues of Mistrust. Thus, the role of administrators as special education directors appeared to impact perceptions of the need to articulate and be up-front regarding special education laws and available services in order to establish a more trusting relationship between special education clients and public school administrators.

According to Johnson (2002):

...most parents say schools keep details about what kinds of programs are available for special needs children pretty close to vest. Seven in 10 [parents] say that 'too many special needs children lose out' because [they] don't know

what they are entitled to. Over half (55%) complain that 'parents find out on their own what help is available to their children – the school is not going to volunteer the information.' (p. 161)

Johnson (2002) warned that as more and more parents become disaffected with an administrator's reluctance or the perception of reluctance to give parents the information they require regarding special education programs and services, the more districts are likely to see an increase in the use of outside parent advocacy groups that tend to encourage avenues of redress that may lead to due process hearings and litigation. Special Education Directors appeared to understand this as indicated by their responses to the research survey.

Conclusions

It might be concluded that Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups have made their mark in the arena of special education in public schools. Administrators are using *SEPAG*. They acknowledge that *SEPAG* can be both helpful to the implementation of special education programs and that they may also contribute to an environment of mistrust between the districts' administrators and parents of special needs students.

According to the implications of the findings, the principal may be viewed as the critical school leader willing to incorporate the resources of *SEPAG* to help mediate appropriate services and programs for special education students. In contrast, the advanced degreed special education director as indicated by the findings appeared more wary of the helpfulness of *SEPAG*.

Additionally, administrators' responses implied that advanced training in the laws and issues pertaining to special education might improve an administrator's ability to communicate better with parents and to create an environment of trust in order to successfully implement effective programs for special needs students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are as follows:

1. Chief school administrators, superintendents, assistant superintendents, and business administrators often have an impact on the view and policies of principals and special education directors. Are there significant differences in perceptions between chief administrators with principals and special education directors or are the viewpoints of the latter administrators in accord with the chief administrators?
2. Are administrators' perceptions of Level of Helpfulness and Level of Concern regarding SEPAG indications of the amount of money spent per special education child?
3. Are there differences regarding perceptions of Special Education Advocacy influenced by the length of an administrator's service?
4. Do administrators report that their training prepared them to negotiate with Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups or do they report that additional supplementary training at the University level is necessary?
5. Do administrators believe the state should provide better in-service training for the issues associated with special education? Moreover, in what areas do

administrators feel the state has not provided ancillary training needed to cope with special education issues?

6. Do the administrators view the State as a mediator in helping them resolve special education conflicts? Should the state take a greater role as a district advisory resource by providing a compendium of case studies and suggestions for more effectively handling these issues?

7. Do administrators clearly articulate the quality of public school special education programs to parents of special needs youngsters thereby negating the need to use SEPAG?

8. Does a parent's level of education, gender, and district factor residence affect his/her evaluations of the Level of Helpfulness and Levels of Concern regarding perceptions of SEPAG and special education programs in public schools?

9. Do SEPAG perceptions of public school administrators and public school special education programs contribute to collaboration between clients and public school service providers?

10. Do special education attorneys appreciate the budgetary issues that challenge public school administrators?

11. Would the replication of this study on a state-wide level increase administrators' level of awareness and level of reflection of the impact of SEPAG on public school special education programs?

12. Would educational programs and in-service meetings result in different perceptions of SEPAG compared to the perceptions of those administrators without specific training programs.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggested that administrators use SEPAG. Additionally the study's findings suggested that a district's location impacts the use of SEPAG and that administrative roles and levels of training impact administrators' evaluations of these groups as helpful special education advocates and reliable sources for up-to-date information regarding special education laws and special education issues. Supported by the literature, the study's findings suggested that principals and special education directors who keep abreast of special education policies and procedures and the activities of SEPAG appear more confident of their preparation to communicate with and establish a collaborative, trusting environment with parents of special needs children in their districts. Thus, it might be inferred that the more educated and the more concerned an administrator is about special education issues, the less threatened that administrator might be of SEPAG. Indeed, informed administrators may realize the potential for mutual advocacy (i.e., administrators and SEPAG working together to mediate appropriate services and programs that are in the best interest of the special needs children they serve).

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Appendix A
Letter of Solicitation

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY™

1 8 5 6

Dear Educator,

Currently, I am a Doctoral Candidate at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey in the Department of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy. This spring I am conducting research in the area of Special Education with the intent of completing my Dissertation this summer.

The *purpose of my study* is to explore the role of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in order to determine their usefulness in assisting administrators in planning educational programs for special needs youngsters in our public schools. This is an important area to focus upon since the laws and regulations governing Special Education Programs have become exceedingly complex and difficult to interpret. Recent trends suggest that parents of special needs youngsters and district administrators have begun to seek the advice from out-of-district experts to include a growing number of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Nevertheless, the efficacy of these groups has yet to be determined. In addition, my study will also explore additional contributing factors, addressed in the survey, which may impact an administrator's ability to implement policies that promote successful Special Education Programs and positive school experiences for children with special needs.

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in this research endeavor. The instrument to be completed is entitled The Survey of Perceptions of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups and follows the format of a Likert scale in which the participant indicates his/her levels of agreement with a list of statements. *The time needed to complete the survey is approximately twenty minutes.*

Naturally, you have the right to decline without penalty. However, your *voluntary* participation is invaluable to this research and to our existing knowledge regarding Special Education issues.

Please note that in order to ensure *anonymity* the names of schools or administrators are not required to complete the survey nor will they be used in the dissertation or in the report of my findings.

Once the surveys are returned, all instruments and findings will be securely locked and retained in my home office to maintain *confidentiality*. *Only the researcher and her mentor will have access to the data. The data will be kept for three years and then destroyed. There is no risk or discomfort.*

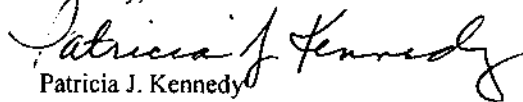
You may contact Patricia J. Kennedy, the researcher, for more information at (973) 226-0505.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached through the Office of Grants and Research Services. The telephone number of the Office is (973) 275-2974.

Most importantly, please complete this survey and return it to me by mail in the enclosed stamped envelope preferably within the next two weeks.

In completing this survey you imply your consent to participate in this research project. Thank you so much for your assistance in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,



Patricia J. Kennedy

Seton Hall University

Doctoral Candidate

Enclosure

College of Education and Human Services

Department of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy

(Formerly Department of Educational Administration and Supervision)

Tel. 973.761.9397

400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2685

Appendix B

Survey of Perceptions of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups

Survey of Perceptions of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups

Dear Participant,

The purpose of this survey is to gather information regarding the usefulness of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups in assisting administrators in planning educational programs for special needs youngsters in public schools. The survey will also explore additional contributing factors that may impact an administrator's ability to implement policies that effectively promote successful Special Education Programs.

Your anonymous and confidential participation is greatly appreciated. Please respond as an administrator. The results of this research will be reported to you as indicated by your request below. Thank you for your assistance.

Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups are formal and informal organizations that use specialized knowledge and expertise to advocate for the needs of special education youngsters by helping parents resolve problems with schools. Many of these groups can be accessed on-line.

Check yes or no in response to the following questions:

- 1.1 Are you familiar with Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups? ___ YES ___ NO
- 1.2 Have you used any Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups? ___ YES ___ NO
- 1.3 If yes, have you found Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups to be helpful? ___ YES ___ NO
- 1.4 If yes, have you found Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups to be detrimental? ___ YES ___ NO
- 1.5 If yes, would you utilize a Special Education Parent Advocacy Group again? ___ YES ___ NO

If you are familiar with and/or have used a Special Education Parent Advocacy Group (SEPAG), please respond to the following statements. If you have no knowledge of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, go on to question 2.1.

Using the 5 – 1 scale below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Please write in a number from 1 – 5 for each statement.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups:

- 1.6 Give accurate up-to-date information regarding special education issues. _____
- 1.7 Explain and interpret special education laws for parents. _____
- 1.8 Provide valuable information to help guide the evaluation/IEP process. _____
- 1.9 Support parents' efforts in developing plans for long term goals. _____
- 1.10 Promote collaboration between Child Study Teams and parents. _____
- 1.11 Help parents to understand due process and their rights under IDEA and Statute 504. _____
- 1.12 Are sensitive to the power of their roles and the trust parents place in them. _____
- 1.13 Are a reliable source for articles and books on Special Education issues. _____
- 1.14 Support parents, educators and administrators in assessing information to help prevent and resolve conflicts. _____

- 1.15 Provide an ethical and desirable service in selling books, videotapes and advocacy training to parents. _____
- 1.16 Promote an environment of mistrust between parents, administrators and Child Study Team members. _____
- 1.17 Help parents to gain knowledge and experience regarding school placements, programs, resources, and legal obligations. _____
- 1.18 Should be in the business of selling products/services to parents and schools. _____
- 1.19 Refer clients to legal experts in lieu of school experts. _____
- 1.20 Play into the concerns and fears of parents of special needs youngsters. _____
- 1.21 Suggest that special education teachers and administrators are uninformed and not trustworthy. _____
- 1.22 Are sensitive to a district's budget constraints in providing special education services. _____
- 1.23 Represent a thriving industry that is in business to reap profits. _____
- 1.24 Are useful when communication breaks down between parents and school personnel. _____
- 1.25 Should be used routinely in negotiating services for special needs youngsters in the public school setting. _____

Using the 1 - 5 scale below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements with regard to your feelings. Please write in a number from 1 - 5 for each statement.

- | Strongly
Agree | Agree | Neither Agree
Nor Disagree | Disagree | Strongly
Disagree | |
|-------------------|---|-------------------------------|----------|----------------------|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| 2.1 | I have had adequate coursework/professional development in the area of Special Education to effectively inform and direct the district's Special Education Program. | | | | _____ |
| 2.2 | I am aware of and have kept abreast of the activities of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. | | | | _____ |
| 2.3 | I am able to create a trusting, collaborative environment in negotiating Special Education services with parents of special needs students. | | | | _____ |
| 2.4 | I feel that Special Education programs are adequately funded to meet the costs of Special Education services. | | | | _____ |
| 2.5 | I have garnered most of my expertise in the area of Special Education from on-the-job experience. | | | | _____ |
| 2.6 | I would benefit from additional professional development in Special Education law and advocacy in order to effectively deliver Special Education services. | | | | _____ |
| 2.7 | My district has been involved in litigation regarding Special Education services. | | | | _____ |
| 2.8 | Working as an administrator of special education programs requires a high level of legal expertise. | | | | _____ |
| 2.9 | Parents of special needs youngsters appreciate the district's concerns regarding budget constraints. | | | | _____ |
| 2.10 | I am always up-front in giving parents of special needs youngsters ample information regarding our district's Special Education support services regardless of budget concerns. | | | | _____ |
| 2.11 | Parents are more likely than districts to seek help from parent advocacy groups. | | | | _____ |
| 2.12 | There is a current trend to shift from looking at the Child Study Team as the experts to looking to experts outside the district. | | | | _____ |
| 2.13 | Advocacy groups tend to be anti-district. | | | | _____ |
| 2.14 | My district would welcome the aid of a pro Board (of Education) Advocacy Group in the area of Special Education. | | | | _____ |
| 2.15 | Districts would benefit from establishing their own Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. | | | | _____ |

3.1 Please select the leadership styles below that best describe your own.

- Scientific Political Conservative Creative
 Humanistic Visionary Collaborative Other

If you have utilized a Special Education Parent Advocacy Group(s), please list them and indicate your level of satisfaction with their services using the 1 – 4 scale below. Please write only one number for each group.

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Very Satisfied | Somewhat Satisfied | Not Very Satisfied | Not At All Satisfied |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Name of Special Education Parent Advocacy Group.	Rating
---	---------------

4.1. _____

4.2. _____

4.3. _____

4.4. _____

5.1 What role best represents your own?

- Special Education Director Principal

5.2 What is your gender? Male Female

5.3 What is your ethnic affiliation?

- Caucasian/White African American/Black Hispanic/Latino
 Oriental/Asian Other

5.4 How would you describe your school district's location?

- Urban Suburban Rural

5.5 What is your School Type?

- Elementary Middle Junior High High School Other

5.6 What is your county? Bergen Essex Passaic Morris

5.7 What is your District Factor Grouping?

- A B C/D D/E E/F F/G G/H I J

5.8 What is your highest level of schooling or the highest degree you have received?

- Graduated from a four-year college
 Master's Degree
 Doctoral Degree
 Other professional degree (MD, JD, Ed.S. etc.)
-

Your completion of this survey implies your consent to participate in this study. Thank you for your assistance.

Patricia J. Kennedy

Dear Participant,

Please check "yes" or "no" to the following question:

Do you wish to receive a summary of the research findings? _____ YES _____ NO

If yes, it will be necessary to include your district's address:

District	Street	City	State	Zip Code
----------	--------	------	-------	----------

Appendix C
Survey Evaluation Checklist

Survey Evaluation Checklist

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for agreeing to evaluate Survey of Perceptions of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. Your recommendations for improving this instrument are greatly appreciated.

Please rate the instrument for the following qualities:

	Good	Fair	Poor
Clarity: The directions and sentences are easy to understand.	_____	_____	_____
Content: The researcher's purpose is addressed in the survey's questions.	_____	_____	_____
Format: The layout is easy to follow.	_____	_____	_____
General appearance: The survey has a professional look.	_____	_____	_____
Ease of Use: The survey is easily read and coded.	_____	_____	_____

Recommendations:

Thank you again for your assistance,

Patricia J. Kennedy

Patricia J. Kennedy

Appendix D

Solicitation Letter to District Superintendents

February, 2003

Dear Superintendent,

Currently, I am a Doctoral Candidate at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey in the Department of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy. This spring I will be conducting research in the area of Special Education with the intent of completing my dissertation this summer.

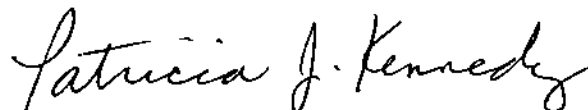
The title of my study is The Perceived Role of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups. In order to complete my research, I am requesting your permission to survey Principals and Special Education Directors in your district. The instrument follows the format of a Likert scale in which the participant indicates his/her levels of agreement with a list of statements. Please note that the names of schools or administrators are not required to complete the survey nor will they be used in the dissertation or in the report of my findings. The time needed to complete this survey is approximately twenty minutes.

Pending your permission and approval by the Seton Hall University's Institutional Review Board, I will be mailing the surveys to your administrators in April. In anticipation of your permission, please sign below and return this letter to me in the enclosed stamped envelope. Since the Review Board will be convening in March, your timely response to this request is truly appreciated.

If you have any questions, you may reach me at (973) 226-0505.

Thank you so much for your assistance in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,



Patricia J. Kennedy
Seton Hall University
Doctoral Candidate

I grant permission to Patricia J. Kennedy to conduct survey research in

District's Name

Superintendent of Schools

Date

Appendix E

Second Mailing to Principals and Special Education Directors

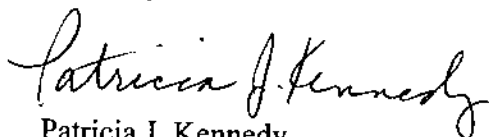
May 14, 2003

Dear Educator,

Just a gentle and pleading reminder...if you have not yet completed my Survey of Perceptions of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups, please reconsider. By taking a few minutes to do so and returning it in the envelope I had provided, you will be helping a colleague to maintain her sanity and complete her research.

If you need an additional copy, please call and leave a message at 973 226-0505. I will gladly mail or fax another survey to you. Your assistance is truly appreciated.

Sincerely,



Patricia J. Kennedy
Doctoral Student
Seton Hall University

Appendix F
Survey Reliability Correlation Matrices

Correlation Matrix for Level of Helpfulness Items

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20											
1. Give accurate information	.70																														
2. Explain/interpret se laws		.64																													
3. Provide info/guide the IEP			.68																												
4. support parents efforts/goals				.49																											
5. Promote collab. bet. CST & parents					.30																										
6. Help parents under. due process/rights						.42																									
7. Sensitive to power of role & trust of parents							.28																								
8. Reliable source for se articles & books								.38																							
9. Help prevent & resolve conflict									.43																						
10. Ethical service selling bk & advocacy training										.25																					
11. Promote environ. Of mistrust bet. Par. & CST											.28																				
12. Help par. gain know. Re: school placements												.19																			
13. Should sell prod. & services to par. & schools													.17																		
14. Refer clients to legal experts in lieu sch. experts														.10																	
15. Play into concerns & fears of parents															.14																
16. Suggest se teachers/adm. are not trustworthy																.04*															
17. Sensitive to budget constraints																	.07														
18. Thriving industry reaping profits																		.16													
19. Useful when communication breaks down																			.13												
20. Should be used routinely in neg. se services																				.26											
																					.33										
																						.72									
																							.19								
																								.28							
																									.40						
																										.34					
																											.30				
																												.36			
																													.19		
																														.32	
																															.40

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Correlation Matrix for Level of Concern Items

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Adequate coursework/professional dev.		.59	.48	-.15	-.14	-.30	-.08	-.03*	.10	.16	.22	.17	.22	-.03*	.09
2. Aware of & keep abreast of SEPAG			.48	-.09	-.05*	-.26	-.03*	-.08	.15	.13	.13	.19	.14	.00***	.12
3. Create a trusting/collaborative environ.				.07	.13	-.30	-.23	.09	-.10	.20	.06	.09	.07	-.08	.12
4. Feel that SE programs are adequately funded					.12	-.05*	-.05*	-.13	-.25	-.11	-.13	-.07	-.27	-.09	.14
5. Expertise in SE form on-the-job experience						.09	-.45	.01**	.00***	-.03*	-.09	-.03*	-.03*	.12	.07
6. Would benefit from prof. dev. in SE law & advocacy							.16	.11	.01**	-.16	-.03*	-.09	-.18	-.02*	-.01**
7. District has been involved in SE litigation								-.27	.16	.22	.10	.10	.14	-.06	-.01**
8. Administration of SE requires high level of legal expertise									-.06	.31	.08	.04*	.14	.18	-.08
9. Parents appreciate district concerns re: budgets										-.17	.09	.16	.23	.13	-.21
10. Adm. are upfront re: ser. regardless of budg. Concerns											.20	-.14	.02*	-.22	-.01**
11. Parents more than district seek advice from SEPAG												.23	.13	.09	.15
12. Current trend to shift to out-of-district experts													.33	.31	.11
13. SEPAG tend to be anti-district														.16	-.08
14. District would welcome aid of pro-Board Advocacy Group															.18
15. District would benefit from establishing their own SEPAG															

$p \leq .05$ $p \leq .01$ $p \leq .001$

Appendix G

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
1 8 5 6

April 9, 2003

Patricia Kennedy
1 Colt Street
Fairfield, NJ 07004

Dear Ms Kennedy:

The Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board has reviewed the information you have submitted addressing the concerns for your proposal entitled "The Perceived Role of Special Education Parent Advocacy Groups". Your research protocol is hereby approved as amended through expedited review. The IRB reserves the right to recall the proposal at any time for full review.

Enclosed for your records are the signed Request for Approval form and the stamped original Consent Form. Make copies only of this stamped Consent Form.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

According to federal regulations, continuing review of already approved research is mandated to take place at least 12 months after this initial approval. You will receive communication from the IRB Office for this several months before the anniversary date of your initial approval.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Giuliana Mazzoni, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Elaine Walker, Ph.D.

Office of Institutional Review Board
Presidents Hall
Tel: 973.275.2974 • Fax: 973.275.2978
400 South Orange Avenue • South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2641