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Surviving the First Years: A Principals Guide for Implementing a Quality Special Education Program

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Introduction

In today's schools, building level administrators are faced with a variety of challenges as they strive to provide leadership that promotes successful learning experiences for all students. Promoting the success of all students is also the foundation of current federal legislation with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates as well as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Answering the call of these directives and the goal for all students to experience success, building level principals must have fundamental knowledge of special education programs and services. However, research indicates that principal preparation course work may not target special education leadership and responsibilities (DiPaulo and Tschanned-Moran 2003). Further studies, such as work done by Lasky and Karge (2006), examined principal preparation programs and found the need for increased training in the area of special education during the preservice phase. Therefore, with little emphasis during the principal preparation experience in providing leadership at the building level in the area of special education, many beginning principals find themselves challenged on a daily basis. Learning on-the-job becomes the starting point for all fundamental knowledge regarding special education leadership.

The purpose of this paper is to explore strategies for implementing a quality special education program that can be utilized by building level administrators in their first years of leadership. Many new leaders feel intimidated by the challenges regarding the area of special education and their lack of knowledge in dealing with students that receive services. Parents can also be a concern, especially those who are savvy in regard to the current laws and regulations.

Beginning principals may want to consider specific measures for implementing a quality special education program. A flourishing and rewarding experience may be enhanced by addressing three key areas. These areas include 1) Information Review, 2) Site Study, and 3) Human Relations.

Information Review

State Plan of Regulations for Implementing IDEA

As a means of orientation, principals should be encouraged to first review several informational items. At the state level, each department of education addresses the implementation of IDEA. By visiting the individual state department websites, beginning leaders can review the adopted state plan of regulations for implementing federal legislation. Many other sources of information can also be found at the state level. As an example, by visiting the website for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, information provided includes such documents as the outline for the special education process, sample Individual Education Program (IEP) forms, and procedural safeguards.

District Policies for Implementing IDEA

At the district level, policies regarding program regulations and services are also available. As with the

state information, most district policy manuals are available online and are included in the district website information. These policies highlight areas describing the services the district provides, the evaluation process, the discipline of students who receive special services, and instructional accommodations.

Building Level Practices

At the building level, many schools have student and faculty handbooks, where further information can be reviewed regarding services and programs. Although there may be several buildings within a school district, each site may have specific services provided that are pertinent to the grade levels of students served.

An additional document to review for information is the School Improvement Plan. This plan can be examined to find out more information on current initiatives regarding special education and intervention strategies.

Meeting with Director of Special Services

In conjunction with the review of regulations and policies, the new principal may want to schedule a meeting with the district director or coordinator of special services. By meeting with this key staff member, questions can be answered that arise from the review of information. The director or coordinator will be able to share relevant information and experiences regarding services within the district as well as services provided at the building level.

Site Study

Review Student IEPs

One of the first tasks a new principal should address in the implementation of a quality special education program at the building level is to find out more about the students who currently receive services. All student IEPs should be available for study and the new leader should read each individual plan. These documents will highlight several areas that the principal will ultimately oversee. Such areas of interest include the disability category, the time amount a student is served in the special education setting as well as the general education setting, any related services needed, and current evaluation data. In addition, if a student has a behavior management plan, this will be included in the IEP as well as any modifications needed to enhance student achievement. The IEP document is a contract between the school district and the parents of the student and it is an important piece of information for all principals to consider when addressing those students who are served in a building level special education program.

Analyze the Data

The new building leader can find many data sources to study that will add more understanding of the building in which he or she is assigned. With special education students involved in mandated accountability measures, the need to analyze test data becomes important. Discerning how proficient specific subgroups perform, such as those students receiving special education, will assist the principal in programmatic and school improvement decision making.

In addition to the test data, other sources can also assist the new leader in the orientation process. Discipline records and attendance records are helpful to study for a better understanding of current practices and building policies. At the secondary level, drop out rate is also an area to review. Questions may arise such as the following: 1) What is the attendance rate of students receiving special education as compared to those assigned to only general education classes? 2) In comparing discipline measures such as suspensions from class, is there a difference between those receiving special services and those that do not? 3) What is the current drop out rate and is there a difference between subgroups?

Another area to study is the practice involving class assignments. Questions pertaining to how students who receive special services are assigned to specific teachers/classes may arise as the principal reviews the information. Examples may include: 1) Are students who receive special services evenly distributed among teachers/classes? 2) At the secondary level, are students identified in need of special education heavily assigned to vocation or basic level classes?

By studying data information, the new leader becomes more prepared to address any challenges faced by the school stakeholders. Action plans can then formulated to address student achievement and school improvement efforts.

Study the Building

A study of the actual building site is a must for all new leaders, especially in regard to how the physical layout of the building impacts students who receive special services. Areas to address might include access and location of classes. Questions may emerge such as: 1) Are there staircases or other physical barriers that might hinder travel around the building? 2) What is the location of the classes where special education teachers are assigned—are the classrooms located away from the mainstream or are they integrated within the main hallways and corridors of the building? 3) On the outside of the building, are playgrounds and common areas accessible for all students?

By addressing site issues, the new leader is more informed about accessibility and current practices. Focusing on any areas of concern will ultimately lead to a physical site that is conducive for all students to attend.

Budget Review

Fiscal responsibility is a topic that is very important to building level principals. For new leaders, a budget review will enhance the understanding of the building level expenses and purchasing practices, especially with the special programs provided on site. Such budget items to review would include accounts set aside specifically for special education and related services. These accounts may stem from federal flow-through monies as well as state and local tax revenues, and may have specific guidelines for their use. Of interest to the new leader is the actual amounts assigned within the building budget and the manner in which these amounts are allocated. A review of past budget expenditures would also provide information on how the monies had been expended and what items or services were actually purchased.

By studying the building level budget, the new leader can gain a better understanding of how purchases align with current special education campus initiatives. This review will also provide a basis for the

development of future budgets that target needs for the delivery of special programs.

Human Relations

Continuum of Services and Support Staff

New leaders assigned to the building level will be interested in the actual continuum of special education programs and the staff assigned to teach within these programs. Many delivery models are available for students identified as needing special education.

Current practices may include delivery models that range from a totally inclusive educational model to classes that are self-contained in design. Of significance would be the number of students assigned to these placements and the number of teachers assigned within the special education program. Some buildings may serve very few students and have a minimal number of teachers, while other sites may provide an expansive array of services.

The new leader may actually want to schedule face-to-face meeting with the special education staff to gain more insight into the program offered on campus. These key members can assist the principal in learning about individual students, class size and scheduling, and collaborative practices that may occur between general and special educators. In addition, the new leader may have questions regarding the building level referral process in addition to questions regarding if there are any pre-referral practices that occur as a response to interventions.

Parents and Students

In addition to meeting with staff members, the new leader may choose to have an orientation session at the beginning of the school year with parents and students involved in the special education program. The principal will ultimately be sitting side-by-side with parents in IEP meetings, and as an introductory measure, this meeting could provide a foundation for future communication and collaboration. There are times when IEP meetings can become adversarial. On occasion, parents can be steered by advocates who may not have knowledge concerning the student or the district policies. By establishing a relationship early in the year between home and school, a positive atmosphere is more likely to evolve.

Summary

By understanding the area of special education and how to implement a quality program, principals can be better prepared to face the challenges of beginning leadership. The strategies provided that address the review of information, site study, and human relations can assist the principal in developing, communicating and monitoring a vision of learning that includes all students.

[This article was modified from a presentation at the 19th Annual Conference within a Conference of the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration Conference in Nashville, TN, April, 2008. Sponsoring organization homepages: <https://www4.nau.edu/cee/orgs/ncpea/> and <http://www.naesp.org/>

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