

2015

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Recommended Citation

Schaaf, Michael; Williamson, Robert; and Novak, Jeanne (2015) "Are Midwestern School Administrators Prepared to Provide Leadership in Special Education?," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 27: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol27/iss2/6>

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Are Midwestern School Administrators Prepared to Provide Leadership in Special Education?

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School administrators set the tone for the implementation of special education within their schools. Researchers examined school administrators' perceptions of (a) how well their leadership preparation programs equipped them to administer special education programs and (b) special education topics about which they desired additional coursework. Survey responses from 174 school administrators working within the state of Ohio revealed some variability in perceived levels of preparation. Highlights include that the majority of respondents indicated that they were less than adequately prepared to assist special education teachers with instructional methodologies, facilitate inclusive schedules, oversee curriculum or alternate assessments, and/or manage budgets for students with disabilities. The vast majority of respondents (90.5%) indicated that they would have benefitted from at least some additional coursework regarding students with exceptionalities within their leadership preparation programs. Limitations and implications regarding educational leadership preparation programs are addressed.

The preparation of educational leaders contributes significantly to the quality of any school system. Over the past quarter century an emphasis on the importance of effective educational leadership is a continuing theme in literature on the subject (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; CCSSO, 1996; Gates, Ross, & Brewer, 2001; Leithwood, 1990; McCarthy 2002). The skills required of school administrators to provide effective leadership have expanded in recent years to include responsibility for responding to the needs of increasingly diverse student and teacher populations. In addition, school administrators are expected to do more with less, show improvement more quickly, and supervise staff with increased responsibilities, all while providing visionary leadership based on the most recent research available (King, 2002). Hence, it is imperative for leadership preparation programs to keep pace with these changes by preparing program candidates with the expanded skill set required of today's school administrators.

Nearly 70% of principals in a study by Farkus, Johnson, and Duffett (2003) reported that the "typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with what it takes to run today's school districts" (p. 39). This may be particularly true when it comes to the administration of special education programs. Petzko (2008) found that school leaders ranked the

administration of special programs and serving students with exceptionalities among the most important of their responsibilities, but ranked their preparation to lead in these areas among the areas in which they received the least amount of training. In a similar study, DiPaolo and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found that principals identified special education law and implementation of special education programs as top concerns for professional development. More recently Christensen, Robertson, Williamson, and Hunter (2013) found that 32% of respondents in their study indicated that “they received no special education training in their principal preparation programs” (p. 104). Pazez and Cole (2013) noted,

Content related to special education and special education law has been a long neglected area within university-based administrator preparation programs and has been strangely absent in conversations relevant to the creation of administrator preparation programs that embrace a social justice model of leadership. (p. 243)

The limited preparation that school administrators receive in special education is of particular concern given the increased participation of students with disabilities in general education settings, the complexity of implementing IDEA 2004 and No Child Left Behind legislation (Yell, Shriener, & Katsiyannis, 2006; Zirkel, 2013), and the fact that in recent years “special education has been a fertile area for litigation” (Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010, p. 41). As school administrators are increasingly being held accountable for improving educational results for students with disabilities and for ensuring that their rights are protected, administrator preparation programs will need to respond with a greater emphasis on special education law and implementation.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of currently serving public school administrators in regards to special education issues and to gain their perspectives into their own graduate level leadership preparation program’s overall effectiveness in preparing them to deal with issues surrounding the success of children with exceptionalities. For the purposes of this study, a leadership preparation program was defined as any postsecondary academic program leading to state licensure in the area of school leadership. Two specific research questions were addressed:

1. What are school administrators’ perceptions regarding the quality of leadership training programs in preparing them to administer special education programs?
2. Do school administrators identify areas of unmet need related to special education in their leadership training programs?

As states influence and often dictate methods for obtaining state licensure in school administration, analysis of perceptions from those who have received these licenses would seem prudent. Only through appropriate examination of these questions can leadership preparation programs and state licensing entities gain an understanding as to whether their sequences of course content and licensing procedures are adequate in meeting the demands that graduates face when working with children in today’s schools.

Method

Participants

Following approval from the appropriate institutional review board (IRB) regarding the treatment of human subjects, recruitment emails were sent to 1,013 public elementary and secondary school administrators in Ohio whose contact information was attained through school websites open to the public. Administrators were defined as those with the title of principal, assistant principal, superintendent, assistant superintendent, or other supervisory role such as director of curriculum and instruction. Department leaders predominantly working with students in the classroom were not included in the definition of administrators. The email introduced the purpose of the study, described informed consent procedures, requested study participation, and included a link to an on-line survey provided through *SurveyMonkey*®. In addition, email recipients were asked to forward the survey link to other district colleagues who were currently serving as school administrators in Ohio. All respondents were asked to provide their administrative role so that only school administrators as defined would be included in this study.

Instrumentation

The survey, a 17-item questionnaire, was developed to collect self-report data from administrators. A preliminary set of nine questions requested educational background and employment information about the respondent (e.g., university attended, highest degree granted, current administrative position, number of years in current position) as well as data about his or her employing school district (e.g., size, geographical location within the state of Ohio, student demographics). The main section of the survey requested administrators' perceptions about how well their leadership training program prepared them in regards to various special education topics. The specific topics are listed in Table 1. Respondents rated their preparation for each topic on a 5-point Likert-type nominal scale (*not at all, somewhat, undecided, adequately, very adequately*). Administrators were also asked about their teaching licensure programs, previous classroom experience, and whether they would have benefited from additional training on various special education topics as part of their leadership training programs. The special education topics presented to respondents are provided in Table 2. Survey questions were vetted by three university professors with expertise in school leadership programs with regard to defining appropriate content and readability. In addition, one retired school administrator vetted question content to ensure questions were relevant and readable for typical school administrators.

Results

Participants

Study participants included 174 individuals in administrative roles within 117 public preK-12 schools across Ohio. The school administrators who participated in this study were highly educated with 85.1% (n=148) of respondents having earned a master's degree and another 14.9% (n=26) having earned a Ph.D., Ed.D., or Ed.S. Participants were most likely to have completed a leadership training program at Bowling Green State University (21), Ashland University (20), University of Dayton (19), The Ohio State University (12), and other universities within Ohio

(88) in numbers less than ten each. Just under 8% (n=14) of participants reported completing their leadership preparation training at a university outside Ohio. Participants included administrators in the roles of principal (98), assistant principal (32), superintendent (22), assistant superintendent (6), and various other administrative positions such as director of curriculum and instruction (16). Slightly more than one-third of respondents had been in their current positions for zero to three years (40.2%, n=70) or four to eight years (36.8%, n=64) while only 23.0% (n=40) had been in their current positions for longer than eight years. Interestingly, one in six respondents (16.7%, n=29) stated that they spend at least 30% or more of their time on special education issues.

When asked to describe the type of school district in which they work, 4.6% (n=8) responded that they work in an urban district, 50.0% (n=87) responded that they work in a suburban district, and 45.4% (n=79) responded that they work in a rural district. When these administrators were asked what percentage of students in their building are identified as having exceptionalities, nearly two-thirds or 59.2% (n=103) indicated that 6-15% of their student body is so identified. Almost one-third or 28.1% (n=49) indicated that over 15% of their student population and only 7.5% (n=13) indicated that less than 5% of students is identified as having exceptionalities. Notably, nine respondents indicated that they did not know the percentage of students in their building that are identified as having exceptionalities.

Research Question Results

A primary purpose of this survey was to determine the adequacy of training related to special education that school administrators felt they received through their leadership preparation programs. In order to answer this question, respondents ranked their perceived level of preparation for various administrative duties. These results are presented in Table 1. Over half of respondents indicated that they were only somewhat or not at all prepared for facilitating inclusive schedules, collecting data, and overseeing curriculum and alternate assessments for students with disabilities. Nearly half of respondents indicated that they were only somewhat or not at all prepared to participate with parents in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and address behavioral issues presented by students with exceptionalities. Greater numbers of respondents indicated that they were at least adequately familiar with due process procedures, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. When it came to assisting teachers with instructional methodologies, 59.2% of administrators stated that they felt adequately or very well prepared to assist general education teachers; however, only 35% stated that they felt adequately or very well prepared to assist special education teachers.

Table 1

Level of Preparation Received in Leadership Training Program

| How well did your leadership training program prepare you for... | Not at All n(%) | Somewhat n(%) | Adequate n(%) | Well Prepared n(%) | Undecided n(%) |
|---|--------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Your first job as an administrator | 8(4.6) | 68(39.1) | 55(31.6) | 18(10.3) | 25(14.4) |
| Participating in IEP meetings | 23(13.2) | 53(30.5) | 51(29.3) | 20(11.5) | 27 (15.5) |
| Addressing behavior issues presented by students with disabilities | 14(8.1) | 63(36.2) | 57(32.8) | 9(5.2) | 31(17.8) |
| Assisting general education teachers with instructional methodologies | 5(2.9) | 34(19.5) | 71(40.8) | 32(18.4) | 32(18.4) |
| Assisting special education teachers with instructional methodologies | 29(16.7) | 61(35.1) | 47(27.0) | 14(8.0) | 23(13.2) |
| Facilitating inclusive schedules for students with mild disabilities | 30(17.2) | 57(32.8) | 45(25.9) | 9(5.2) | 33(19.0) |
| Oversight of curriculum for students with intensive disabilities | 49(28.2) | 57(33.3) | 31(17.8) | 2(1.2) | 35(20.1) |
| Data collection techniques for special education | 45(25.9) | 56(32.2) | 27(15.5) | 19(10.9) | 27(15.5) |
| Oversight of alternate assessments | 62(35.6) | 42(24.1) | 30(17.2) | 1(0.6) | 39(22.4) |
| Participation with parents and IEP process | 17(9.8) | 55(31.6) | 51(29.3) | 20(11.5) | 31(17.8) |
| Familiarity with due process | 12(6.9) | 46(26.4) | 65(37.4) | 22(12.6) | 29(16.7) |
| Familiarity with IDEA | 9(5.2) | 43(24.7) | 60(34.5) | 33(19.0) | 29(16.7) |
| Familiarity with ADA | 14(8.1) | 55(31.6) | 55(31.6) | 17(9.8) | 33(19.0) |
| Familiarity with Section 504/Rehabilitation Act | 22(12.6) | 50(28.7) | 57(32.8) | 18(10.3) | 27(15.5) |

Note. N = 174. Figures in bold typeface indicate selection by largest number of respondents.

Respondents were also asked about their teaching licensure programs and previous experiences as a classroom teacher. Three-quarters of respondents (131) reported that they were licensed to teach only general education students, 18.4% (n=32) reported that they were licensed to deliver instruction to students in special education or students in both general and special education, and 6.3% (n=11) did not respond to this question. When asked if they had been given an opportunity

to work with various populations of children or youth with exceptional learning needs during student teaching, practicum, or classroom teaching, with the ability to choose multiple answers, 73.6% (n=128) responded that they had worked with students with *mild* disabilities, 29.9% (n=52) responded that they had worked with students with *intensive* disabilities, and 36.8% (n=64) responded that they had worked with *gifted* students. One in five respondents (n=38) responded that they had not worked with any students with exceptionalities during their student teaching, practicum, or classroom teaching experiences.

A majority of administrators reported that they would have benefited from additional coursework regarding students with exceptionalities during their leadership preparation program. Table 2 provides the percentages of respondents who felt they would have benefited from additional training on various special education topics. Over half of the respondents indicated a desire for additional coursework focusing on behavior modification techniques, methods of instruction and assessment of exceptional children, and IDEA and legal aspects of special education. Only 9.5% of respondents indicated that they did not need additional preparation with special education issues in their leadership training program. Most administrators (97.5%) indicated that they received continuing education in the form of in-service training that added to their knowledge of issues surrounding students with exceptionalities.

Table 2

Perceived Areas of Unmet Training Need in Leadership Preparation Programs

| Subject | % Desiring additional coursework |
|--|---|
| Behavior modification techniques | 63.9 |
| Methods of instruction of exceptional children | 57.0 |
| Assessment of exceptional children | 50.6 |
| IDEA and legal aspects of special education | 50.0 |
| Teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities | 34.8 |
| Teaching students with mild to moderate disabilities | 28.5 |

Note. Only 9.5% of respondents indicated that they did not need any additional preparation with special education issues.

Discussion

Understanding the current skill sets required of today's school leaders is vital to structuring leadership preparation programs that appropriately prepare school administrators to meet these modern needs. Results of this study mirror others in suggesting that the content of leadership preparation programs at institutions of higher education may not have been adequate relative to providing the knowledge and skills that school leaders need to support students with

exceptionalities (Levine, 2005). With nearly half the administrators in this study reporting that they exited their leadership preparation programs unprepared or only somewhat prepared to facilitate inclusive schedules, collect data for special education, oversee curriculum and alternative assessments for students with disabilities, participate with parents in IEP meetings, and address behavioral issues presented by students with exceptionalities, school administrators' knowledge in these areas may still be lacking.

Administrators in this study had limited exposure to students with exceptionalities and special education issues during both their initial teaching licensure programs and their leadership training programs. Only 18.4% of administrators were licensed in special education and 21.8% had not worked with any students with exceptionalities during their student teaching, practicum, or classroom teaching experiences. A majority of administrators surveyed reported that they would have benefited from additional coursework in their leadership training programs on topics such as behavior modification techniques, methods of instruction and assessment of exceptional children, and legal aspects of special education. Less than one in ten administrators indicated that they received sufficient pre-service preparation related to special education. Instead, most administrators cited the importance of in-service training in expanding their knowledge of issues surrounding students with exceptionalities.

Given that many states are facing a real financial crisis regarding the funding of public education in general (Verstegen, 2011), results of this study may sound an alarm concerning the possible future costs of mistakes made by administrators regarding special education issues. Given that over one third of respondents indicated they had been employed in their present position less than three years prior to survey participation and the totality of the survey results, current or future mistakes in the administration of special education programs would seem reasonable to expect. Strader (2007) noted that "special education may be the most litigated educational law issues school leaders face" (p. 178). A failure by administrators to act in full accordance with special education law may constitute a significant liability for districts as parents press to hold schools and those that run them accountable for such failures (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010).

Limitations

This study gives insight into how well current school administrators feel they were prepared to take on the challenges and issues related to the teaching of students with exceptionalities in the state of Ohio. It is important, however, to point out several limitations to these results.

The generalizability of study results must be considered within the context of the sample size and composition. This study took place in Ohio and most of the 174 survey respondents (92%) completed their leadership preparation programs in Ohio. As such, these results may be less indicative of the leadership preparation programs administered by other states. Because states license school administrators using different standards, some states may require more training in the areas related to children with exceptionalities than others. In Ohio, leadership preparation programs are required to address national Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) program standards as well as to align with state-specific standards, including standards related to ensuring full access to curriculum, assessment, and instruction and to advocating for high levels

of learning for all students (“Ohio educator licensure programs,” n.d.). Future research employing a larger sample of school administrators across multiple states could uncover any relationships that exist between state mandated licensure standards and the perceptions of school administrators serving under license within each state.

While self-report, online surveys are relatively easy to develop and administer, the reliability and validity of the survey data collected may be limited by the lack of independent verification of data, the inability of respondents to request clarification on the meanings of questions, and the potential bias introduced by selective memory for events that occurred at some point in the past and exaggeration of those events. Finally, because we do not know how long it had been since the school administrators in the study completed their leadership training programs, we were unable to examine whether these programs have evolved over time to better prepare pre-service school administrators to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. However, recent literature on special education training in educational leadership programs (e.g., Pazey & Cole, 2013) suggests that such an evolution has not occurred.

Conclusion

What are school administrators’ perceptions regarding the quality of leadership training programs in preparing them to administer special education programs and do school administrators identify areas of unmet need related to special education in their leadership training programs? Results of this study would seem to indicate that current Ohio school administrators do not believe that their leadership preparation programs provided them with the necessary knowledge and skills required to administer special education programs. Almost 44% of respondents described themselves as “not at all” (14.2%) or “somewhat” (28.9%) prepared regarding special education issues (See Table 1); this compares to just over 38% who described themselves as “adequately” (27.9%) or “well prepared” (10.1%). Just under 19% reported that they were undecided as to how prepared they felt regarding the areas they were asked about.

These response counts equate to just under 63% of respondents reporting being undecided, somewhat, or not at all prepared after graduating from their leadership preparation program concerning the special education issues covered in the survey. This represents an alarming number of current administrators who feel they were not prepared to meet the special education needs of students and teachers within their buildings at the time of their initial appointment to an administrative position. It also likely explains why most administrators have continued their education on special education topics through in-service trainings. Of interest is how well such educational activities prepare administrators to address key legal and instructional aspects of special education. Additional research is required to answer these critical questions.

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