

Introduction

What Every Principal Needs to Know About Special Education

This book is intended for building administrators, those individuals who stand at the front line of educational reform and who are responsible for ensuring that every student has a fair and equal educational opportunity. The book may be different from others written for principals about special education. It does not focus solely on describing special education rules and procedures. Although the rules are important, this book goes further to help the principal understand both the intents of various policies as well as how to effectively implement them.

Principals have always been central to high quality special education programs in schools, but never more so than in today's climate of high standards and high stakes accountability. Today, school leaders need to have deep knowledge about special education and the students who receive these services. Until recently it was possible for a principal to delegate responsibility for special education to a special education teacher or department head. Now, principals must be involved with the education of any student because they are accountable for improving the achievement of all students.

The case of Mr. Baker illustrates this point.

Mr. Baker began his career as an elementary school principal in the mid-1990s and became a middle school principal several years ago. During his time as an administrator, Mr. Baker has witnessed a sea change in how students with disabilities are expected to be educated. When Mr. Baker first became a principal, he was under

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great pressure from parents and the school district to “include” more of the students with IEPs into general education classrooms, particularly those students who were assigned to two special classes in his building. He found his special education budget strained by the need to hire more paraprofessionals who followed individual students with disabilities into classrooms. He also had to deal with teachers who did not want to include any of the students with IEPs in their classrooms, particularly those with more severe disabilities. However, Mr. Baker was very proud of the fact that he had very few complaints from parents and that the students with disabilities seemed to be accepted by other students in the building.

Then, in 2001, something changed. No longer was the quality of a special education program measured only by the time a student spent in general education or by how accepted students might feel. Suddenly, all students with disabilities were expected to meet annual achievement targets on the state assessment. The scores of these students were reported publicly, and the focus shifted to what students with disabilities were being taught and how well they were achieving. Initially, Mr. Baker was stunned. Surely, no one expected that all of the students with disabilities in his school would be tested on the same grade-level content. Moreover, the expectation was that these students would receive instruction in grade-level subject matter curriculum. After all, most of the students were two or more years below grade level in reading and math, and some were being taught functional living skills.

Mr. Baker soon found out that, indeed, all students were to be instructed in the same content. He did, however, learn that a small number of students could be held to alternate achievement standards.

Mr. Baker, like many of his colleagues, had entered a new era in public education, one in which he is now expected to be accountable for improving achievement of all students in his school. Mr. Baker was aware of how his low-income students had been progressing and how African American and Hispanic students were doing as a group, but he had never paid a great deal of attention to how his students with disabilities were doing. These responsibilities required that Mr. Baker and his

staff gain new knowledge about special education, not just the new procedures about assessments and accountability but also how to ensure that all students in the school had a real opportunity to access the curriculum. Mr. Baker believed that his school was making progress. Scores for all students were generally on the upswing, although the scores of students with disabilities varied a lot across grades and years. Mr. Baker also believed that his teachers worked as a team. Then Mr. Baker was transferred to a new middle school where he continues to face the challenge of building a culture of achievement and high expectation for all students, and he faces more policy changes. These include the possibility of yet another type of assessment for students with disabilities based on “modified achievement standards” and new procedures for identifying learning disabilities. He also needs to be aware of how “transition planning” can help students with disabilities focus their high school careers and postsecondary goals. This book is intended to help Mr. Baker and his many colleagues in deepening their understanding of the many new special education policies as well as effective special education programs and strategies.

As more and more students with disabilities are educated in general education schools and classrooms, building principals have learned a great deal about who these students are and how they are educated, but there is still much to learn. The demands to improve the educational outcomes of these students are greater than ever. Special education policies and programs are changing and quickly demanding even greater knowledge on the part of school leaders. In this book, I provide an overview of the essential policies as well as effective practices for educating students with disabilities. I hope that the information in this book will help school leaders face the challenges of today’s schools.

This book is organized into four sections: (a) Section I provides an overview of key current policies governing special education, (b) Section II discusses elements of quality special education programs and services, (c) Section III provides guidance on what is known about how to create effective special education, and (d) Section IV sums up what it means to be an effective leader in special education.

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FIVE THINGS EVERY PRINCIPAL NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION

Principals who are effective leaders of special education in their building should understand five key principles:

- Principals must understand the core special education legal foundations and entitlements. They should understand the intent or rationale of specific procedures. Simply following rules without understanding leads to cookie-cutter programs and pro forma compliance, not high quality special education.
- Principals need to understand that effective special education is truly individualized and matches instruction to the learning characteristics of students with disabilities.
- Principals must understand that special education is neither a place nor a program but a set of services and supports tailored to the needs of individual students so that they can progress in the general education curriculum.
- Principals must know how to meaningfully include all students with disabilities in standards, assessments, and accountability requirements.
- Principals need to know how to create the conditions within their schools that support effective special education practices and to finally integrate special education into all aspects of school improvement.

In Section I, I expand on these key ideas. I provide specific knowledge and practical strategies as well as examples for how to create effective special education. I hope that you find the book useful. I have spent many hours in schools and have been amazed by the knowledge and commitment of good principals. Good special education exists in schools with caring, strong, knowledgeable leaders. Principals can make a big difference in how students with disabilities and their families feel about school as well as what they learn. Because you are so important, I hope that you find the ideas and resources in this book valuable.