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Special Education Requirements and Logistics: Bridging the Gap of Understanding for School Leaders

Petra L. Nelson
Arkansas Tech University

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SPECIAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS AND LOGISTICS: BRIDGING THE GAP
OF UNDERSTANDING FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

A Dissertation Submitted
to the Graduate College
Arkansas Tech University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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in the Center for Leadership and Learning
of the College of Education

May 2018

Petra L. Nelson

Education Specialist, University of Central Arkansas, 2014
Master of Education, Doane College, 2000
Bachelor of Science, University of Idaho, 1986

Dissertation Approval

This dissertation, “Special Education Requirements and Logistics: Bridging the Gap of Understanding for School Leaders,” by Petra L. Nelson, is approved by:

Dissertation Chair:

Christopher Trombly
Assistant Professor
Center for Leadership and Learning

Dissertation Committee:

Catherine Nichols
Associate Professor
Center for Leadership and Learning

Patricia Kohler-Evans
Professor
University of Central Arkansas

Program Director:

John Freeman
Professor
Center for Leadership and Learning

Interim Graduate College Dean:

Jeff Robertson
Professor, Department of Physical Sciences
Dean, College of Natural & Health Sciences

Permission

Title: Special Education Requirements and Logistics: Bridging the Gap of Understanding for School Leaders

Program: Educational Leadership

Degree: Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Principals and assistant principals are the educational leaders of their school buildings and must have a working knowledge of special education law, programs, and special education teacher supports. This study reinforces the need for principals and assistant principals to be fully prepared to lead all of their schools' programs, including special education, prior to assuming responsibility for those schools. Without proper preparation, building-level administrators may unwittingly hinder the educational progress of students with disabilities, denying them a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and/or due process, and – in the process – placing their schools and districts at legal risk.

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Chapter I: Background

“Special education is the most legalized segment of P-12 schooling” (Zirkel, 2015, p. 263). Principals must have a working knowledge of special education to help teachers navigate special education requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When the requirements of IDEA are not followed, not only are individual students’ educations placed at risk, but also financial strains may be placed on those students’ school districts.

In Arkansas alone, 46 special education due process hearings were held between the years 2008 and 2017 to address complaints against school districts. Of these 46 hearings, 26 were found against the school districts involved. The allegations addressed at these hearings ranged from school districts’ failure to provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE), to districts’ failure to follow specific youngsters’ individual education programs (IEPs), to districts’ failure to implement individual students’ IEP-related behavior plans. Judges’ rulings mandated school districts to fulfill specific requirements and to remedy the instances of non-compliance. Some of the districts involved had to rewrite IEPs, some had to provide compensatory education and teacher training, while others had to hire new personnel (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017b). According to the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) Special Education Unit (SEU) dispute resolution administrator, the average cost of a special education due process hearing is approximately \$85,000 (Hogue, 2017). Without a working knowledge and understanding of IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations, principals could very well lead IEP teams to make decisions that are not compliant within federal and state regulations (Zirkel, 2015).

Principals are often at the center of guiding IEP team meetings and helping facilitate decisions like IEP services, placement within the students' least restrictive environment (LRE), and teacher schedules (Fisher, 2012). As they are expected to be fully involved in these considerations, principals must understand how to make informed decisions in the creation of IEPs that ensure that students make adequate progress both academically and behaviorally.

In a study conducted by interviewing special education directors regarding special education litigation, it was revealed that school administrators lack a full understanding of the special education process. Special education directors stated that this lack of understanding and training for teachers and administrators led to litigation. Special education directors also addressed the importance of parent-school relationships, indicating that those that are strained or distant can cause conflicts within the special education decision-making process (Shuran, 2012). When parents feel secure, they are less likely to file litigation because they perceive administrators as being invested in their child, knowledgeable about the law, and consistent in their response to the child's needs. When parents feel secure, trust is established. Trust is a critical element in fostering good relationships between the school and parent (Shelden, 2010).

Preventing litigation in special education can be accomplished by providing district level training for teachers and administrators. District level training should also be provided to parents to help the flow of information between the school and families. This type of training is intended to foster communication and build trust between parents and school personnel (Schanding, Cheramie, Hyatt, Praytor, & Yellen, 2017, p. 6),

Teachers and administrators are also encouraged to seek advice from district level office to help navigate special education rules and regulations (Shuran, 2012).

“Given legal and case law development, schools must ensure that students’ rights are protected and that they receive substantive educational benefits. Principals are instrumental in ensuring the rights are protected and that educational opportunities result in a quality education” (Wagner, 2010, p. 48). School administrators must keep up with legislative developments as well as have knowledge of case law. To keep up with this information, principals have resources available to them through websites under the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and state special education websites (Wagner, 2010). Principals must effectively lead teachers and reinforce high expectations for all students – both those with and those without disabilities, and they must communicate these expectations to their staff (Maxam & Henderson, 2013). Principals are responsible for all parts of special education, which include defending the rights of students with disabilities, helping build appropriate programs for these students, and providing support for special education teachers.

Even when everything is done correctly, litigation can occur and principals must be prepared for this type of event. By understanding IDEA and all its nuances, administrators ensure compliance with special education law. Public schools must be able to explain exactly what the school district is doing to ensure compliance regarding special education. A school district looks to individual school buildings for this information, meaning that the school leader is responsible for providing the assurances as well as data that supports compliance for all students. In research conducted by Searl (2012), that author explains that some litigation can take a narrow assessment of what is

reviewed during a trial phase. Because of this, schools must be prepared and able to combat it. As a leader, the principal ensures all teachers within the building are following IDEA regulations. By continually reinforcing IDEA, the principal and his/her staff will be able to verify students' rights are in place. Problems occur when administrators are not knowledgeable of IDEA requirements and when they do not understand how to guide teachers appropriately regarding special education law (Searl, 2012).

Framework

Principals are the educational leaders for school buildings and programs, and the personnel who staff them, including special education programs and teachers. Research indicates that a lack of course work and experiences in special education during university and college preparation programs could lead to a lack of understanding of special education requirements and nuances for principals. The theory of self-efficacy plays an important role in leadership (Versland, 2013). Leadership self-efficacy “can have a positive influence on the attitudes and motivations of teachers as well as student achievement...it can either empower people to action, or negative, cause people doubt, resulting in inaction” (Versland, 2013, p. 13). The theory of self-efficacy suggests that, at present, too many principals do not lead special education but instead merely accept that it is required by IDEA. If principals' self-efficacy in the area of special education were to be improved, they could become proactive and informed school leaders about this enormously important aspect of educational programming, and – more important – effective advocates for students who present with disabilities.

Problem Statement

School administrators are responsible, among many other things, for supporting the faculty and staff within their buildings. They must be knowledgeable of the different roles and responsibilities of all teachers. “Despite over 40 years of increased legal protections for students with disabilities,” though, “problems persist because school administrators and educators are woefully unprepared to apply the principles of special education law to their daily practice” (Umpstead, 2015, p. 7). Zirkel (2015) explains that school leaders are especially inadequately prepared to address, or informed about, the nuances of special education law. Principals who lack working knowledge of such features of IDEA as child find, special education eligibility, and FAPE for all students not only place their students’ educations at risk, they also place their school districts in legal jeopardy for failure to comply with special education law (Zirkel, 2015).

Administrators must understand special education laws, how to manage special education programs, and how to support special education teachers.

An analysis of research on administrator preparedness in special education law and requirements revealed that, despite being titular educational leaders, administrators often lack a full understanding of the requirements for educating students with disabilities (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). Pazey and Cole (2012) concluded that the only way that change in this area can happen is by enhancing university-based administrator-preparation programs. “Knowledge and expertise of special education and special education law are powerful forces and tools that can supplement and strengthen equality and equity of opportunity in our schools” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 264). If current administrators are not prepared to lead special education, how can they become

knowledgeable, and what gaps exist in their current understanding of special education laws and requirements?

Purpose of the Study

As principals are the educational leaders of their school buildings, there are specific responsibilities that each must fulfill. In 2008, Arkansas adopted the Educational Leadership Policy Standards, commonly referred to as the ISLLC 2008 standards, which include six standards that all administrators must satisfy and uphold (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2008). These standards include a focus on the development of a school vision and school culture, management of resources, response to community and diverse needs, fairness, integrity, and understanding political, social, legal, and cultural contexts. Although each standard has a specific requirement, all six standards begin with the statement, “An educational leader promotes the success of every student” (National Policy Board Educational Administration, 2008), meaning that all students, including those with disabilities, must be the focus of every administrative decision.

Research indicates that principals do not always receive adequate course work or experiences in the realm of special education during the programs that are intended to prepare them for their current positions as school leaders (Christensen, Roberston, Williamson, & Hunter , 2013). This can cause problems for students and teachers, and can potentially create financial hardship on districts if violations of IDEA occur. To help principals gain knowledge in special education, supports must be put in place to assist leaders in bridging gaps in their understanding of IDEA and in acquiring the working

knowledge of special education law that they will need to manage special education programs and to support special education teachers.

The purpose of this study is to determine what gaps currently practicing Arkansas school administrators have in understanding special education laws and regulations, programming, and teacher supports. By determining gaps in sitting administrators' understanding, this study aims to help districts target the necessary supports that they will provide to administrators through professional development.

Research Questions

The two research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What level of understanding do current Arkansas administrators have regarding IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations?
2. What supports do current Arkansas administrators need regarding IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations to feel they have a working knowledge to be a special education leader?

Limitations

This study is limited to current public-school principals and assistant principals in Arkansas. Private school principals are not included in this study, as their work in the private school setting limits their requirements under IDEA (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008).

Definitions of Key Terms

Some terms, phrases and acronyms will be used in this study. To assist the reader, the following education- and special education-related terminology and associated definitions are provided.

“ADE” is “the acronym used to refer to the Arkansas Department of Education which is the chief educational regulatory agency for the State of Arkansas” (Smith, 2010).

“Assistant Principal” is a building-level administrator in an Arkansas public elementary, middle, junior high or high school. The assistant principal is under the direct supervision of a principal.

“FAPE” is the acronym used to refer to a Free and Appropriate Public Education. All students with disabilities are to be provided – at public expense – an appropriate education that is designed to meet the unique needs of each child (Wright & Wright, 2007).

“IDEA” is the acronym used to refer to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This is the act that governs all federal special education rules and regulations (101st United States Congress, 2004).

“IEP” is the acronym used to refer to an Individualized Education Program. This is a plan written for any student qualifying for special education in the public-school setting. The plan is individualized to meet the unique needs of the child (101st United States Congress, 2004).

“ISLLC 2008,” an acronym for the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards of 2008, is the term used to refer to the Educational Leadership Policy Standards to which all Arkansas administrators must adhere (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2008).

“LRE” is the acronym used to refer to the Least Restrictive Environment. This is the educational environment in which the child will, to the maximum extent appropriate,

participate with nondisabled peers (Office of the Superintendent of Public School Instruction, 2016).

“Principal” is the chief building-level administrator in an Arkansas public elementary, middle, junior high or high school. The principal may be the only administrator in his or her building or supervise a team of assistant principals” (Smith, 2010).

“PSEL 2015” is the acronym used to refer to the Professional Standards of Educational Leaders, the successor standards to ISLLC 2008 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016).

“SEU” is the acronym used to refer to the Arkansas Department of Education Special Education Unit “which is the chief education regulatory agency for the State of Arkansas” (Smith, 2010).

Summary

All students deserve FAPE. In Arkansas, there are legal cases that demonstrate that students with disabilities have not always been provided with the educational opportunities that should have been afforded to them in the public school setting. Building-level administrators are expected to be educational leaders of all aspects of the school building, including special education. If administrators are not fully knowledgeable of special education laws, programming, and/or teacher supports, they may lead special education teams to make decisions that do not support IDEA. This can lead to improper programming for students with disabilities as well as financial hardship for districts if litigation is filed.

An evaluation of current Arkansas building-level administrators' understanding of IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations is warranted. By determining the levels of knowledge that school leaders possess, and by identifying gaps in their understanding, this study will assist school districts in determining the targeted professional development that will need to be provided to help support current building administrators to lead special education teams within their schools.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Educating the youth of America is a vital and complex process. Teachers and administrators must be prepared to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students who walk through school building doors. University and college preparation programs attempt to prepare educators and leaders by providing curricula designed to equip them to obtain educational licensure. Upon graduation, teachers and administrators should be prepared to provide a kindergarten through 12th grade education to all students with and without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

In today's public school setting, students with disabilities are provided FAPE, and this can mean many things. Students with disabilities are afforded an educational placement that teaches them in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). An LRE can be fully inclusive in the general education class, or pull-out services in resource or self-contained settings for all or a portion of the school day, or homebound instruction, or even residential or hospital placements. The LRE is reasonably calculated and determined by a committee so the student can make adequate progress. It is the expectation that administrators support educational decisions for all students, including those with disabilities.

School administrators are responsible for maintaining their schools, for managing educational programs, and for supporting the faculties and staffs within their buildings. They must be knowledgeable of the different roles and responsibilities of all teachers. Unfortunately, school leaders are often inadequately prepared or informed about the nuances regarding special education. Administrators must have a working knowledge of special education laws, of how to support special education programs, and of how to

support special education teachers (DiPaola, 2003). This literature review will provide a background on the history of special education. It will review college and university preparation programs, administrator and teacher perspectives regarding special education, and the supports necessary for students to be successful and for administrators to acquire the knowledge necessary to support all aspects of special education within their school buildings.

The History of Special Education

The history of special education in the United States dates back to the 1800s. Between 1800 and 1860, according to Spaulding and Pratt (2015), special education was in the “Early Reform” phase (p. 92). Prior to this time period, individuals with disabilities were viewed as deviant and were often abused through “exploitation, exclusion, expulsion, and in some cases, execution” (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 94). The turn of the nineteenth century, which was characterized by advances in science and medicine, as well as in greater enlightenment of philosophical thought, saw such early reforms regarding the education of individuals with disabilities as “improved societal attitudes, the founding of multiple institutions for training and teaching, and legislation to protect people with disabilities” (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 94).

Following this “Early Reform” phase, according to Spaulding and Pratt (2015), came a period of “Stagnation and Regression” that lasted roughly from 1860 through 1950. During this period of time, society tried to find ways to “explain, control and eliminate disabilities” (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 96). Intelligence testing was developed in hopes of identifying ways to measure intelligence so that individuals with below average intellect could be isolated or otherwise removed from the general public.

During this period, when many educators felt that the general public school setting was not appropriate for students with disabilities – both because they were deemed more difficult to teach, and because they were more likely to be shunned or teased by their typically developing schoolmates, separate schools were created for children with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

The era of “Contemporary Reform,” according to Spaulding and Pratt (2015), began in 1950 and continues to this day. Following World War II, perceptions about disabilities changed for a variety of reasons. Not only did medical advances provide ways to help treat certain disabilities, but advocacy groups also began to organize. “Parent groups lobbied for services for their children through litigation and legislation, respectively. As court cases were won and laws passed in favor of those with disabilities, schools were mandated to provide education to all children” (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 100).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act largely discontinued the segregation of students with disabilities and began the movement toward allowing students with disabilities to be served in the public school setting. Schools brought students with disabilities into the regular public school building but often still removed them from the general education classroom (U.S. Congress, 1975). Requirements were put into place that provided educators a way to diagnose, identify, and teach students with different disabilities. Evaluations were conducted to decide whether a student needed special education or not. Prior to placement in special education, a committee would determine whether a child had a physical or mental disability that substantially limited her/his learning. The committee would further evaluate the possible causes for the

disability. Strengths and weaknesses in physical, emotional, social, vocational, and intellectual areas had to be determined to appropriately serve the student. Once diagnosed, the committee would select a disability category for the child and then determine the services and interventions necessary (Payne, n.d.).

This was also the time when the concept of the “least restrictive environment” (LRE) was first discussed, so as to provide a continuum of services for students, including mainstreaming some of them. Local education agencies had to consider educational programming and provide “a statement of the specific educational services to be provided to such child, and the extent to which such child will be able to participate in regular educational programs” (U.S. Congress, 1975). This led to mainstreaming, where placement for students with disabilities into the general education classroom was considered for at least part of a school day. The Regular Education Initiative (REI) also helped move students with disabilities from complete segregation within the public-school building to actual interaction with students in the general education classroom (Winzer, 2014).

The *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, or Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 as it was otherwise known, was the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), or P.L. 108-446. IDEA was first written in 1997 and later amended in 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). IDEA “supports states and localities in protecting the rights of, meeting individual needs of, and improving results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families” (Duncan, 2010). IDEA protects individuals with disabilities from birth to 21 years of age. The major components of IDEA are child find, eligibility, and FAPE.

Every district in the United States must conduct child find activities to ensure that all students with disabilities are located and provided the opportunity to receive an education. Programs are in place for children from birth to the age of 21. Eligibility has specific guidelines set forth to appropriately identify children according to different disability categories. This is done in order to plan appropriate programs, and to serve identified students in their LRE in order to allow them to access the general curriculum, interact with like age peers, and make progress. FAPE in has been redefined since its inception with P.L. 94 -142. The first major change for FAPE came as a result of litigation in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Board of Ed. of Hendrick Hudson Central School Dist., Westchester Cty. v. Rowley* (Takiff, 2016). . This case was filed by the parents of a student with a hearing impairment, who argued that their child needed a sign language interpreter in order to access FAPE. In its decision, the Supreme Court helped to clearly define the meaning of FAPE. “We therefore conclude that the ‘basic floor of opportunity’ provided by [the Education for All Handicapped Children Act] consists of access to specialized instruction and related services which are individually designed to provide educational benefit to the handicapped child” (Takiff, 2016, p. 4). FAPE helps to ensure that all identified students with disabilities who need special education are afforded their rights as governed by IDEA (Zirkel, 2015). FAPE is considered the “central pillar of IDEA and it accounts for the vast majority of IDEA litigation” (Zirkel, 2015, p. 269).

Given the intricacies of special education IDEA regulations, it is imperative that teachers and educational leaders are fully aware of the regulations and their implications within the school setting. IDEA governs the structure of public education for students

with disabilities. Schools are bound to provide an education that is designed to help each student progress toward meeting goals in their Individual Education Program (IEP) and make progress in the general curriculum. Programming will be different for each eligible student. Essentially, the decision that is to be made by the team is a placement one; LRE is the standard toward which the team is striving. The continuum of placement is from a fully inclusive model all the way to homebound instruction if necessary (Zirkel, 2015). Since the inception of IDEA an increasing number students with disabilities are entering the general education classroom with supports designed to foster their individual success. When educators are aware of these regulations and follow them as intended, students with disabilities have a greater chance of being successful while in the public-school setting. University Preparation Programs are one way of providing future teachers and administrators with the knowledge necessary to fully understand IDEA and its implications for the education of students with disabilities.

University Preparation Programs for Educators and Administrators

University teacher preparation programs are structured to help college students obtain teaching certificates in specific educational areas. These programs limit course selection and require students to select one or two areas of focus for teacher licensure. By being required to focus in this way, students are helped to acquire depth of knowledge in the content that they will teach, but are not necessarily prepared to work with the diverse learners whom they will teach. These limitations are not entirely the fault of higher educational institutions. States require that teacher licensure be specific to areas of instruction, causing universities to build programs around those licensure content or level areas (Blanton, 2011). According to Blanton (2011), this is where the mentality of linear

teacher preparation programs become the main barrier to preparing general education teachers for educating students with disabilities.

McLesky and Brownell (2015) reviewed program profiles of many different universities, and developed recommendations for both state policy makers and those higher educational institutions that provide teacher education programs. McLesky and Brownell (2015) assert that graduates of all of these programs must be adequately prepared to teach students with diverse needs, and that these programs must move from preparing emerging educators for general education or special education in isolation to ones that incorporate both content-specific knowledge and pedagogy with preparation for working with youngsters who present with diverse learning profiles

To help teachers to move to inclusive practices, one study identified “High-Leverage Practices” (HLP) that link directly to student achievement. The study moves away from an emphasis on standards and curriculum to a focus on teacher preparation and skillful practices with effective outcomes in the classroom (McLesky & Brownell, 2015). The author concludes that teacher preparation programs must allow pre-service teacher to practice core principles of HLP prior to being responsible for student outcomes. One of the key HLPs cited in this research was “collaboration with professionals to increase student success” (McLesky & Brownell, 2015, p. 17). Through collaboration, teams “develop and adjust instructional or behavioral plans based on student data, and the coordination of expectations, responsibilities, and resources to maximize learning” (McLesky & Brownell, 2015, p. 17). While this article included many excellent suggestions and isolated 22 specific practices, it also illustrated that a separation still exists between general and special education teacher training.

In a critical review of the preparation of general education teachers to educate students with disabilities, Rosenzweig (2009) explains that the faculty of university programs and those who plan staff development cannot assume that future and present teachers understand what inclusion of students with disabilities means. Educators can only be expected to change their approach from content-centered instruction to student-centered instruction if given the appropriate tools (Rosenzweig, 2009). When inclusive and collaborative models are applied correctly in the classroom setting, they can prove to be beneficial for students with disabilities as well as for the education system as a whole (Rosenzweig, 2009).

Administrative Preparation Programs

Administrators play an important role in the climate of any school. They provide supports for educators in the classroom, and must be aware of educational laws that must be followed – including, not least, those pertaining to special education. An investigative study reviewed 97 administrator-preparation programs in different states to determine whether special education law was part of the requirements. Seventeen programs had embedded components to include special education, and eight programs required a special education law course that was unique and self-standing. The remaining programs provided special education law courses as electives only (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

Administrators are instructional leaders and must be well versed in special education law to help ensure FAPE for students with disabilities, yet administrators, while the official educational leaders of their schools, often lack full understandings of the requirements for educating students with disabilities. From their study of university based education preparation programs, Pazey and Cole (2012) have concluded that the

only way for change to happen is by improving those university administrator programs to include coursework and experiences in special education and special education law.

“Knowledge and expertise of special education and special education law are powerful forces and tools that can supplement and strengthen equality and equity of opportunity in our schools” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 264).

Teacher Perceptions of Educating Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are included in the public school setting. Often, these students are successful in the general education classroom, when given some accommodations to access the general curriculum. It is important to understand that accommodations do not lessen the curriculum, but merely provide students with the ability to access it. Accommodations are created by IEP teams to help a student to make adequate progress toward meeting academic and behavioral goals. Students can learn in the general education classroom with their like age peers when accommodations are provided with fidelity. Many educators are not prepared in their university programs to teach students in the general education classroom, causing misperceptions of how to appropriately teach and support students with disabilities. According to Billingsley (2014), there is a lack of emphasis on special education topics in leadership programs. Overall, teachers tend to have positive attitudes about inclusive practices, but feel that the implementation is problematic. One major determinant of teachers’ attitudes is their perception of principals’ attitudes toward inclusive practices. It is imperative, therefore, that principals hold and communicate clear expectations regarding inclusive practices (MacFarlane, 2013).

Although teachers are at the forefront of teaching students with disabilities, principals and assistant principals should play active roles in ensuring that teachers provide to students with disabilities appropriate educations within their classrooms. Without strong leadership, students with disabilities may not be provided the necessary supports to be successful.

Administrator Perceptions of Educating Students with Disabilities

Administrators are expected to provide inclusive leadership, but there is limited research on how principals work to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities. This could be due to a lack of understanding and to administrators' "dispensing rather than distributing special education leadership in schools" (Billingsley, 2014, p. 8). Research on leadership attitudes regarding special education has revealed that many principals view the provision of special education more as an obligation to be discharged than as an undertaking worthy of their thought and attention (Maxam & Henderson, 2013). While such attitudes are unfortunate, it is likely that, absent solid understandings of IDEA, many principals are unaware of how to build and support appropriate programs for students with disabilities. Although "the overall percentage of student with disabilities receiving accommodations in the K-12 schools nationally in 2008 was approximately 13.4%, ...few educators are well versed in how to effectively work with students who have disabilities" (Maxam & Henderson, 2013, p. 71).

A study about high school principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education class room was conducted in Texas. It revealed that when principals were adequately prepared in their university or college programs regarding special education and inclusion, they tended to have a more positive attitude

about inclusive settings for students with disabilities. The attitudes of these principals reflected the expectation that both special and general education teachers adequately educate students with disabilities. The study further revealed that, while principals felt that students with disabilities should be included in the general education classroom, they did not feel that these students should be included in core academics (Farris, 2011).

“They viewed inclusion as just a restructuring technique not a way to reform education” (Farris, 2011, p. 27). Another study regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities indicated that principals’ negative attitudes could be attributed to lack of experience.

“The principals with little special education experience had less favorable attitudes toward inclusion, than those principals with moderate special education teaching experience” (Smith, 2011, p. 92).

Role of the Administrator as a Special Education Leader

Special education instructional support. The role of a school administrator has changed over the years. When schools were first organized, administrators had a much more hands-off approach to the classrooms within their building. Today, that is no longer the case, as administrators are expected to be active and involved leaders. School leadership has a great effect on student learning, and directly impacts student outcomes (Schulze, 2014). To understand the importance of educational leaders, it is important to review the types of leaders there are and the impact they have on school buildings.

Drawing upon the work of numerous other scholars, DiPaola (2003) identified five priorities for instructional leaders, including: (a) defining and communicating the school’s mission, (b) managing curriculum and instruction, (c) supporting and supervising teaching, (d) monitoring student progress, and (e) promoting a learning

climate. DiPaola (2003) further explains that administrators who have clear understandings of special education, students with disabilities, IDEA, and the instructional challenges that teachers face are more likely to be able to support special education programs. “Effective leaders are committed to the success of all students and collaborate with others to achieve this aim” (as cited in DiPaola, 2003, p. 9).

There is a critical shortage of special education teachers across the United States. A critical shortage is the term used to describe a circumstance in which states and school districts struggle to find qualified people to fill a particular role – in this case, the role of special educator. During the years 2014 through 2017, 49 states reported a shortage of special education teachers (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2017). It is imperative that principals understand the roles and responsibilities of special educators and that they work to support those professionals. Without this understanding, special educators often feel unsupported, experience feelings of isolation, and, in many cases, leave the profession. Of the special education teachers who do leave the profession, it has been suggested that seven out of 10 did so because they had not received adequate support (Mott, 2013 p. 26). Special education teachers are more likely to stay in the profession if they feel supported by the principal and by fellow teachers (as cited in Mott, 2013).

Mott (2013) conducted interviews to obtain perceptions of special educators and principals in understanding the role of special educators. Based on the results from the study, Mott (2013) suggested that an open dialogue between special educators and principals regarding their respective roles and responsibilities could foster more support for special education teachers. Mott (2013) further explained, “Principals and special

education teachers might strengthen their relationships by building on their shared perceptions while discussing the areas in which their perceptions diverge” (p. 117).

By providing ongoing support, principals help special education teachers feel fully included as members of the teams of their respective schools. Instructional and teacher support in special education is important. There is another aspect of educational leadership that principals must also perform: They must help ensure that IDEA is followed and that students are provided FAPE. Principals must help lead teachers through the process of compliance and avoid the pit-falls of litigation in special education.

Special education compliance support. “Special education is the most legalized segment of P-12 schooling” (Zirkel, 2015, p. 263). Principals must have a working knowledge of special education to help teachers navigate special education requirements under IDEA. There are countless examples of where districts have been found out of compliance with IDEA. When IDEA is not followed, students’ educations are placed at risk, and school districts are confronted with the financial strain associated with having failed to comply with the statute. Principals must have a working knowledge of child find, eligibility, and FAPE, among other aspects of special education law (Zirkel, 2015).

Principals are often present at IEP team meetings, helping facilitate decisions like IEP services, placement in students’ LREs, and the creation of teacher schedules (Fisher, 2012). Because they are at the heart of these types of weighty discussions, principals must understand how to help make informed decisions in the creation of IEPs that enable students to make adequate progress both academically and behaviorally.

A study in which special education directors were interviewed regarding special education litigation revealed that a lack of understanding among educators of IDEA due process requirements was a common reason for litigation being filed against school districts (Shuran, 2012). Special education directors also expressed that parent-school relationships were a source of conflicts over students' special education services. Preventing litigation in special education can be accomplished by providing training at the district level for teachers and administrators. District level training should also be provided to parents to help promote the flow of information between schools and families. Such training will foster communication and build trust between parents and schools. Teachers and administrators are also encouraged to seek advice from district-level personnel to help navigate special education rules and regulations (Shuran, 2012).

“Given legal and case law development, schools must ensure that students' rights are protected and that they receive substantive educational benefits. Principals are instrumental in ensuring the rights are protected and that educational opportunities result in a quality education” (Wagner, 2010, p. 48). School administrators must keep up with legislative developments as well as have knowledge of case law. To keep up with this information, free resources are made available to them through the websites of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs and individual states' special education websites (Wagner, 2010). Principals must effectively lead teachers and communicate and reinforce the imperative to hold high expectations for all students – not least, those with disabilities (Maxam, 2013). Principals are responsible for all aspects of special education within their schools, from the rights of students with disabilities, to

helping build appropriate programs for these students, to providing supports for special education teachers.

Principals must be prepared to address the legalities associated with special education, for, even when everything is done correctly, litigation is occasionally filed. By understand IDEA and all of its nuances, the principal is in essence ensuring that the litigation gap is bridged. School districts must be able to “articulate exactly what the school district is doing to ensure compliance” regarding special education (Searl, 2012, p. 140). District-level personnel will look to the building for this information, and that means that the school leader is responsible for providing the assurances – and data – to confirm that the school is in compliance. As a leader, the principal ensures that all teachers within the building are following IDEA regulations at all times. By continually collecting data when and if it is requested, the principal and his/her staff will be able to verify that students’ rights are always being upheld. Problems occur when principals are not knowledgeable of IDEA requirements and when they fail to understand how to guide teachers appropriately regarding special education law (Searl, 2012).

Scheffel (2005) identified important principles for schools and principals to follow to avoid litigation. The first one is making sure that teachers understand the law and associated regulations. This includes both general and special education teachers. The next principle is ensuring that all members of the IEP team have expertise related to each child and that child’s disability. The third principle is making sure that the director of special education and the principal are perceived as invested in each child and wanting to make sure that due process is followed. When parents feel secure, they are less likely to pursue litigation because they perceive administration as invested in their child,

knowledgeable of the law and consistent in their response to the child's needs. The fourth principle deals with school district expertise. A district must help each parent feel assured that the district will provide appropriate services for their child to receive FAPE. This can include a continuum of services, therapies and equipment. The fifth and final principle is providing credible data explaining the child's progress on goals, academics, and behavior. District personnel should never assume that a parent does not understand the process required by IDEA and should do everything in their power to support a parent with regard to best programming for the child with a disability.

The available literature makes it clear that school leaders must have skills in place to lead special education teachers and programs, yet preparation programs at universities and colleges are inconsistent in the course work that they require of future leaders in the areas of special education law and leadership for special education teachers. The question arises: How can school leaders gain the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively lead teachers to embrace special education, to support students with disabilities, and to follow IDEA rules and regulations?

Effective Professional Development

University and college administrator preparation programs have variable requirements when it comes to leadership for special education. One way to help administrators in the field better understand and support special education is through ongoing professional development that makes a substantive change. "The need for professional development for principals in special education has been well established" (Wakeman, 2006, p. 154). In a survey conducted with Nebraska principals, 80% of the participating principals "indicated a desire or interest in receiving additional training in

special education. Principals state they do not feel prepared for issues encountered in special education” (as cited in Fisher, 2012, p. 52).

It is important to remember that although resources are put into professional development, not all professional development is of equal quality. For professional development to be meaningful, it must be based on evidence for effectiveness (Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010). If not evidence-based, professional development can be of little value for – but can come at large expense to – a school district.

One example of special education-specific professional development for administrators is called PULSE, “Principals Understanding how to Lead Special Education” (Inglesby, 2014, p. 2). Designed to “address specific principal behavior related to establishing more enhanced leadership in special education” (Inglesby, 2014, p. 20), this multi-day program serves to support administrators by having them develop a continuous professional learning system that focuses on supporting all students through looking closely at practices surrounding the inclusion of students with disabilities within the school system (Inglesby, 2014). Principals who had participated in PULSE report having “increased efficaciousness, cultural proficiency, and technical competence in regard to their leadership role for special education” (Inglesby, 2014, p. 75).

Another professional development approach is the Dynamic Integrated Approach (DIA; Antoniou, Kyriakides, & Creemers, 2011). The purpose of this type of professional development is to support substantial change within an educational system and improve teachers’ skills. If teachers and leaders do not have a full understanding of special education and its nuances, steps must be taken to address those gaps. DIA is one way of helping support change whether in general or special education. Although it

focused on teacher skills, information from Antoniou et al.'s (2011) study of DIA can be used to help administrators understand the acquisition of skills needed by teachers to further their understanding. During the initial session of DIA, participants were assigned to groups and everyone developed his/her action plan through the exchange of ideas and collaboration within an assigned group. After the initial session, monthly sessions were scheduled for the remainder of the school year. Monthly sessions provided participants the opportunity to revise and develop their action plans based on experiences. One of the critical findings in this research was the use of guided reflection on skills linked to the professional development of teachers (Antoniou et al., 2011). Certain lessons from this study of teacher professional development could be translated to administrator professional development – for example, the creation of action plans, collaboration with others, the revising the action plans, and use of reflection upon skills learned throughout DIA.

Figuring out how to provide professional development in a school can be difficult, and blended professional development may be an option for schools to create meaningful professional development to support change (Owston, Wideman, Murphy, & Lupshenyuk, 2008). Blended professional development mixes face-to-face experiences with different forms of technology-delivered ones, along with a variety of pedagogical approaches, and an array of different tasks to be accomplished. Recognizing that the most effective professional development impacts student achievement, proponents of blended learning focus on its ability to promote substantive change with positive outcomes. Change can be met through school-based collaboration, focus on the learning of all students, and linking to the curriculum. Although the focus of blended professional

development is not isolated to special education, many of the ideas shared in Owston et al.'s (2008) study of it can support efforts to increase educators' understanding of special education requirements. "Blended learning is a viable model for teacher professional development" (Owston et al., 2008, p. 209); as such, it would be wise to employ this approach to enhance educators' knowledge of, and to engage them in conversations about, special education practices and procedures, rules and regulations

Johnson and Fargo (2010) researched Transformative Professional Development (TPD) in a study to help science teachers improve their skills at meeting the needs of diverse students. The TPD model has three main components: (a) intensive, sustained whole-school professional development efforts focused on the development of students' conceptual understanding through culturally relevant science and effective teaching methods that incorporate literacy and language strategies; (b) a focus on building relationships between teachers and their colleagues, teachers and students, and teachers and university faculty members to create teacher leadership; and (c) the creation of positive school and classroom climates, and high expectations for success (Johnson & Fargo, 2010, pp. 9-11).

During the two-year study, teachers began by attending a two-week intensive workshop, which focused on integrating science with literature and writing, a book study to better understand English Language Learners and focus on building collaborative relationships with one another. Teachers then met monthly during the first year, refining skills on cooperative learning, reflecting on making modifications, and teaching inquiry based curriculum. For the second summer, teachers met for a three-day session and designed and implemented a set of expectations and procedures for a more effective

learning environment for students. After the summer session, teachers again met monthly and worked on building relationships with students and parents. Peer observations were also utilized to support one another collaboratively (Johnson & Fargo, 2010). By using TPD, teachers built supportive relationships, practiced instructional strategies that were effective, and “learned how to enable the diverse array of students” daily (Johnson & Fargo, 2010, p. 24). “Teacher morale and attitudes are dynamic and can influence the learning environment. The design of TPD not only addresses individual teacher personal, professional and social development but it also includes a cohort approach” (Johnson & Fargo, 2010, p.25).

Gulamhussein (2013) at the Center for Public Education reviewed five principles of effective professional development that have the potential to improve teacher skills and student outcomes. The first principle is that professional development must be of significant duration, and delivered on an on-going basis “to allow time for teachers to learn a new strategy and grapple with the implementation problem” (Gulamhussein, 2013, p. 4). Up to 50 hours of professional development may be needed for a teacher to master a new strategy (Gulamhussein, 2013). The second principle is that professional development must provide support to teachers well into the implementation state of any change. This can be done through coaching or peer support. The third principle emphasizes that teachers must play active roles in learning new concepts; they cannot be passive in their initial exposure to the new learning. Modeling is the focus of principle four. When teachers are provided a model of a new practice, it is more effective and leads to greater understanding. The fifth principle stresses the importance of not

providing generic content. Teachers should be provided professional development that is specific to their needs (Gulamhussein, 2013).

Administrators' Professional Development Needs Regarding Special Education

Principals have specific professional development needs when it comes to special education. They must have a working knowledge of students with disabilities, as well as of instructional strategies to address the behavior challenges and unique learning needs of these students. Administrators must increase their knowledge to meet the challenge of leading a school's special education program, both in terms of the quality of instructional practices and of compliance with requirements of IDEA (DiPaola, 2003). Without this knowledge and understanding, administrators may not provide necessary supports to special education teachers or to programs for students with disabilities. When teachers do not feel supported, their retention in the school – even in the profession – is impacted (DiPaola, 2003).

It is evident from the literature that there are benefits to principals being possessed of greater knowledge of special education programs. Wakeman (2006) found that principals who had greater knowledge of special education did more for students with disabilities and the teachers who taught those diverse learners. Wakeman (2006) explained that such principals met regularly with special educators, readily understood the resources necessary to support special education programs, played an active role in decision making, and were “risk takers” willing to help students with special needs. It is important to note that, although these principals were risk takers, they never took risks with the laws governing special education (Wakeman, 2006).

In a study conducted by Farris (2011), principals who were surveyed about the amount of course work that they had completed in special education during their preparation programs indicated they had completed anywhere from one to nine credits in such course work. “The study recommends more inclusive training be added to a principal’s formal training” (Farris, 2011, p. 75). Yet another study, this one conducted by Fraiser (2003), indicated that principals gained much of their knowledge of special education from district level training. The author concluded, “exposure to special education concepts through special education credits and in-service training were related to a more positive attitude toward inclusion” (Fraiser, 2003, p. 142).

Special education training topics for administrators. Principals risk making poor decisions due to a lack of knowledge in special education law. Such decisions may result in non-compliance and costly litigation that could drain school resources. Such poor decisions must be avoided. One survey shared that principals “had adequate knowledge of IEPs, zero reject and related services” (Schulze, 2014, p. 46). This survey also showed that principals had minimal knowledge of “evaluation, parent participation, procedural safeguards and least restrictive environment” (Schulze, 2014, p. 46).

Administrators have an important role in the special education process. They lead IEP teams to make decisions that impact students’ educational programming and services. Special education team meetings provide the opportunity for parents and school personnel to get together and discuss individual children’s progress. A principal not only takes responsibility for leading these discussions, (s)he is also responsible for ensuring that the IEP is implemented, and that the relationship with the parent is continued (McElhinny, 2014).

Canter (2003) determined that principals have little training in the area of psychological evaluations. Psychological evaluations are administered when a student is initially tested for special education and every three years after a student has been placed in special education. A licensed or credentialed school psychologist is responsible for obtaining information about a student. The student is evaluated for learning, behavioral skills, and mental health concerns. Once the evaluation is completed, an evaluation team comes together to discuss the results of the testing. Principals are part of that team. Principals should have a working knowledge of the procedures used for an evaluation, the factors that influence results, and how results are translated. By understanding psychological evaluations, principals will be better informed to help teams make appropriate decisions for students with disabilities (Canter, 2003).

Another topic that principals should understand is how to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Association for Supervision and Curriculum [ASCD], 2002). Students with disabilities must be served according to their individual needs, and a continuum of services is mandated by IDEA. To ensure that these services are provided with fidelity, principals must support teachers within their buildings. Professional developments should be ongoing, supporting general education teachers in believing – and ensuring – that all students can and do succeed. It is vital that all “school personnel are committed to accepting responsibility for the learning outcomes of students with disabilities” (ASCD, 2002, p. 1). Along with attending to teachers’ beliefs and practices, principals must ensure that their schools’ physical plants can accommodate, and are equipped to meet the needs of, students with disabilities (ASCD, 2002).

Conclusion

Principals have reported both that they had limited course work in the area of special education during their university and college programs (Pazey & Cole, 2012), and that they desire to learn more about special education law and how effectively to support special education programs (Fisher, 2012). It is crucial, therefore, that school districts engage principals in professional development that equips them with the specific knowledge that they will need to lead school buildings that provide the best possible education for all of their students, including those students with disabilities.

Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

“Despite over 40 years of increased legal protections for students with disabilities, problems persist because school administrators and educators are woefully unprepared to apply principles of special education law to their daily practice” (Umpstead, 2015, p. 7). Principals are the educational leaders of their school buildings, and must have a working knowledge of special education law, programs, and special education teacher supports. Without this working knowledge, principals could lead their school buildings and districts into special education due process hearings.

In the state of Arkansas, there are two ways in which parents of students with disabilities can file formal complaints with the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) Special Education Unit (SEU). Parents can either file an official complaint against a school district or file a due process hearing. When a complaint is filed with the ADE SEU, a parent explains the school district’s alleged violation against a student with a disability according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). After receiving the complaint, the ADE SEU sends a team to investigate the allegations. The team has 60 days to complete the investigation and to find the district either in compliance or not in compliance. If the district is not in compliance, then corrective actions with which the district must comply are written.

Corrective actions can include anything from correcting special education paperwork, to engaging staff in additional training, to providing compensatory education for the student on whose behalf a complaint had been filed.

In the school years from 2011 to 2017, 133 complaints were filed with the ADE SEU. Of the 133 complaints, 50 found the identified school districts in non-compliance with state and federal regulations. Although the cost of a complaint investigation is not as great as a due process hearing, it is still costly in many ways. A district must gather evidence for the ADE SEU investigative team, and make staff available for onsite interviews. All of this requires district personnel to be away from the classroom with the investigative team. At a minimum the district will lose money for time used to gather evidence and to hire substitute teachers during the interview process (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017c).

In Arkansas, 46 special education due process hearings were filed against school districts between the years of 2008 and 2017. Of these 46 hearings, 26 were found against the identified school districts. The hearings addressed allegations ranging from failure to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), to an individualized education program (IEP) not being followed, to IEP-related behavior support plans not being implemented. Rulings were made by judges mandating school districts to complete different requirements and to remedy the acts of non-compliance. Some districts had to rewrite IEPs, some had to provide compensatory education and teacher training, while others had to hire new personnel (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017b).

According to Hogue (2017), the average cost of a special education due process hearing is approximately \$85,000. Without a working knowledge and understanding of IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations, principals could very well lead IEP teams to make decisions that are not compliant with federal and state regulations (Zirkel, 2015), and – as a consequence – to incur such expenses for their school districts.

Problem Statement

School administrators must be knowledgeable about the different roles and responsibilities of all members of their school faculties. “Despite over 40 years of increased legal protections for students with disabilities, problems persist because school administrators and educators are woefully unprepared to apply the principles of special education law to their daily practice” (Umpstead, 2015, p. 7). Unfortunately, school leaders are often inadequately prepared or informed about the nuances regarding special education (Zirkel, 2015).

Building-level administrators must understand special education laws, and be able to lead special education programs and support special education teachers. An analysis of research on administrators’ preparedness in special education law and requirements revealed that administrators often lack a full understanding of the requirements for educating students with disabilities, despite the fact that those administrators are responsible for the education of all students in their buildings (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). As “knowledge and expertise of special education and special education law are powerful forces and tools that can supplement and strengthen equality and equity of opportunity in our schools” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 264), it is crucial that policymakers and district-level administrators – and building-level administrators, themselves – identify how to ensure that school leaders acquire and regularly renew this knowledge and skill.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. What level of understanding do current Arkansas building-level administrators have regarding IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations?
2. What supports do current Arkansas building-level administrators need regarding IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations to feel that they have a working knowledge to be a special education leader?

Participants

The participants in this study were currently employed Arkansas public school principals and assistant principals. Arkansas has 238 school districts and 1053 public schools. There are 1061 school building principals and 784 assistant principals currently employed in Arkansas public schools (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017a). These principals and assistant principals lead Arkansas public schools at the elementary, middle, junior high, or high school levels. In some cases, they serve in schools that serve grade ranges as extensive as PreK through Grade 12. Participating principals and assistant principals include individuals who already hold standard state licensure as building-level administrators as well as some who, while not yet fully licensed, are enrolled in the Administrator Licensure Completion Plan (ALPC) (Arkansas Department of Education, 2014).

In order to obtain a standard license as a building-level administrator in Arkansas, an individual must have successfully completed a graduate degree or program of study in leadership, inclusive of an extensive internship conducted at both the elementary and secondary levels; have spent a minimum of four years as a licensed classroom teacher, school counselor, or library media specialist; and have successfully passed the School Leaders Licensure Assessment. An administrator participating in the ALPC program

must hold a current Arkansas standard educator license with at least four years of P-12 experiences as a classroom teacher, school counselor, or library media specialist. They must be enrolled and participate in a university's graduate degree program or program of study in school leadership. These individuals must be employed as building administrators prior to completion of the building level administrator licensure requirements (Arkansas Department of Education, 2014).

Additionally, all principals or assistant principals in their first year of administration must be involved in the state's beginning administrator program. This is a multi-tiered support system designed to help administrators during their first three years of service as building-level leaders. The program is aligned to the Leader Excellence and Development System (LEADS), the state-mandated platform for evaluating school administrators, as well as to the Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL). The PSEL replaced the previous administrator standards, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) 2008 standards. From 2011 through 2017, administrators followed the ISLLC 2008 standards; beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, administrators have followed the PSEL standards. Both sets of standards focus on success for all students, including students with disabilities (Arkansas Department of Education, 2016).

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data for this investigation were collected using a survey that was designed by the researcher, and administered using the *SurveyMonkey*© online platform. The survey instrument consisted of 10 questions that utilized drop-down menus or a Likert rating

scale, and the option to insert comments. The survey also included one open-ended question.

All principals and assistant principals across Arkansas were sent emails containing the link to the survey, and a full explanation that the study sought to obtain their self-assessments of their level of understanding of and skill in special education law and leadership, along with information about where they had acquired their knowledge and skills in this area.

The first set of items on the survey instrument asked respondents for their current leadership positions, their years of experience as school leaders, and the size of their student populations receiving special education services. One item asked administrators to rate their understanding of a variety of special education requirements and processes using a four-point Likert scale (McLeod, 2008) with the following categories: *unaware of this requirement; aware of this requirement but do not understand the specific regulation within this requirement; understand this requirement and can ensure appropriate implementation of this regulation; and fully understand this requirement and could provide professional development on this regulation.*

Another item that employed a Likert scale asked respondents to rate their understanding of special education timeline requirements. Administrators were asked to select from the following three responses for each of several, specific timeline requirements: *unaware of this requirement; aware of this requirement but am not sure about specific timeline; and fully understand this timeline requirement.*

Administrators were presented with an open-ended question that asked them to explain to what they attributed their understanding of special education requirements.

Finally, they were presented with an open-ended question that asked them to identify what would help principals and assistant principals to become better prepared to lead special education programs.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure its trustworthiness, the survey instrument was piloted prior to use with eight current public school district- or building-level administrators in the state of Arkansas (Merriam, 2009). These administrators – some from large districts, others from small ones – were asked to provide feedback regarding the instruments’ design, the clarity and utility of the various items, and about anything else that they considered noteworthy. All eight administrators felt that this tool was clear, and that it would yield the kinds of responses that would be needed to address the identified research questions. The survey instrument, itself, is included in the appendices of this document.

Data Analysis

Once survey results were collected, participating building-level administrators’ responses were analyzed for patterns, and – in the case of their narrative comments – themes (Patton, 2015). In addition to identifying participants’ current levels of understanding and comfort with special education procedures and timelines, the survey instrument yielded valuable information about how these administrators reported having learned about special education law and procedures, as well as about their suggestions for how to help themselves and other building-level administrators to feel more fully equipped to lead special education programs within their schools.

Summary

This qualitative study employed an online survey to obtain information from currently practicing building-level public school administrators in the state of Arkansas about their comfort and confidence leading their schools' special education programs. The study invited participants to provide narrative responses to open-ended questions about how they had acquired their knowledge and skill in the area of special education, and about how building-level administrators might be helped to ensure that their schools' special education programs both comply with legal requirements and foster students' academic and behavioral growth. The chapters that follow present the data from participating administrators' survey responses, along with an analysis of them and some resultant recommendations.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

School building administrators are responsible for leading schools and for supporting faculty and staff within those buildings. They must be knowledgeable of the different roles and responsibilities to be discharged by the various educators who serve students and their families. Unfortunately, school leaders are often inadequately prepared or informed about the nuances of special education (Zirkel, 2015). “Despite over 40 years of increased legal protections for students with disabilities, problems persist because school administrators and educators are woefully unprepared to apply the principles of special education law to their daily practice” (Umpstead, 2015, p. 7).

For this investigation, a survey was developed to determine the level of understanding that current Arkansas building-level administrators possess regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Arkansas special education rules and regulations. It further examined what supports current Arkansas building-level administrators feel that they need regarding IDEA and Arkansas special education rules and regulations in order to be effective leaders of special education. The survey consisted of 10 fill-in the blank and Likert scale questions that asked respondents to identify their current administrative position; the length of time that they have held the positions; the number of students in their school receiving special education services; and how well prepared they felt to meet special education requirements and timelines. Two open-ended questions were also included in the survey to elicit each principal’s and assistant principal’s perceptions about what had helped her/him to lead the special education program within her/his building, as well as to gather each administrator’s input

about and what other supports (s)he needed to acquire a fuller understanding of special education programs.

Survey links were sent to the email addresses of 1,694 current principals and assistant principals in the state of Arkansas. These email addresses were obtained from the 2017-2018 Directory of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (2017). Of the 1,694 emails sent, 1,504 emails reached their intended recipients, and 190 bounced back, indicating that those addresses, while included in the directory, were no longer valid. Of the 1,504 building-level administrators whose emails were successfully delivered, 733 failed to open the survey link. Of the 771 who opened the link, only 187 building-level administrators completed the survey. So, while the response rate was 11.21% of the total emails sent, the completion rate for those who opened the survey was 24.25%.

Survey Results

Respondent demographics. The first question asked respondents to identify the total number of years they had been a principal or assistant principal (see Table 4.1). The response that was selected most frequently by participants was “1-5 years of experience,” with 81 participants (or 43.32%). The lowest number of respondents, 10 (or 5.35%), indicated that they had been administrators for 20+ years.

Table 4.1

Years of Experience in Administration

Years of experience	Percent	Response Number
1 – 5	43.32%	81
6 – 10	25.13%	47
11 – 15	16.04%	30
16 – 20	10.16%	19
20+	5.35%	10

Each participating administrator also identified whether (s)he was the leader of an elementary school, a middle school, a junior high, a high school, or a school with some other configuration of grade levels. Most of the respondents, 82 (or 43.85%) indicated that they were elementary school administrators; 30 (or 16.04%) indicated that they were middle school administrators; 17 (or 9.09%) reported themselves as being junior high school administrators; 51 (or 27.27%) expressed that they are high school administrators; and the remaining 7 (or 3.74%) identified themselves as administrators of schools with other than typical grade-level configurations, such as rural schools that serve kindergarten through 12th grade (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

Building Level Administrator Role

School Level	Percent	Response Number
Elementary School	43.85%	82
Middle School	16.04%	30
Junior High School	9.09%	17
High School	27.27%	51
Other	3.74%	7

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

All of the administrators were asked to identify whether they held the position of principal or assistant principal. One hundred respondents (53.48%) identified themselves as principals, and 87 (or 46.52%) identified themselves as assistant principals.

Additionally, assistant principals were asked to identify whether they were considered the designee for special education in their respective schools. Principals were expected to skip this question; yet, of the 100 principals, only 63 skipped it, and 37 responded.

Twenty-nine of these 37 principals (78.38%) did not consider themselves to be their building's special education designee, while eight (or 21.62%) did consider themselves to be the special education designee. Of the assistant principals, 45 (or 36.29%) reported themselves as being their building's designee for special education, while 79 (or 63.71%) indicated that they did not hold the position of building designee for special education.

By using the web-based survey platform, some figures were rounded and the total percentage may not equal exactly 100%. Each administrator was asked to indicate how

many years they had held their current position, 1 – 5 years, 6 – 10 years, 11 – 15 years, 16 – 20 years, or 20+ years. The majority of respondents, 131 (or 70.05%), reported having held their current position for 1 – 5 years, with the rest of the respondents, 56 (or 29.75%) indicating that they have held their current positions for anywhere from 6 – 20+ years (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

Number of Years in Current Building Administrator Role

Years Current Position Held	Percent	Number of Respondents
1 – 5	70.05%	131
6 – 10	20.86%	39
11 – 15	2.14%	4
16 – 20	5.35%	10
20+	1.60%	3

Number of students receiving special education services. Each administrator was asked to identify the number of students within their building who receive special education services. The underlying assumption of this question was that administrators understand that students for whom 504 plans have been written are not considered part of the special education population. Respondents were asked to select from several ranges of students receiving special education. They were also given the option of selecting “I don’t know,” if they could not identify the number of students receiving special education services in their respective schools. The majority of respondents, 63 (or 33.69%) identified themselves as having special education populations of 26-50 students. Forty-

four of the respondents reported having special education populations of 51-75 students. The next largest number of administrators, 40 (or 21.39%), indicated that they have anywhere from 1-25 students receiving special education services. There were 5 (or 2.67%) respondents whose schools serve special education populations of 126-150 students. Four administrators (2.14%) each selected the following responses to the question about the number of students to whom their schools provide special education services: “101-125,” “201-225,” and “I don’t know.” Only one administrator (0.53%) each selected the following ranges of students receiving special education services: “151-175,” “176-200,” “226-250,” and “250+” (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

Current Number of Students Receiving Special Education Services

Number of Students Receiving Special Education	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
1 – 25	21.39%	40
26 – 50	33.69%	63
51 – 75	23.53%	44
76 – 100	10.16%	19
101 – 125	2.14%	4
126 – 150	2.67%	5
151 – 175	0.53%	1
176 – 200	0.53%	1
201 – 225	2.14%	4
226 – 250	0.53%	1
250+	0.53%	1
I do not know	2.14%	4

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

Preparedness to lead special education. Administrators were asked to rate themselves on how prepared they felt to provide special education leadership in legally required areas under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Arkansas Program Standards. The rating scale allowed participating building-level administrators to select from the following choices: (1) unaware of this requirement; (2) aware of this requirement but do not understand the specific regulations within the requirement; (3) understand this requirement and can ensure appropriate implementation of this regulation; and (4) fully understand this requirement and could provide professional development of this regulation. Although the list of aspects of IDEA and Arkansas Special Education Program Regulations to which each administrator was asked to respond is not exhaustive, it does include multiple topics in which a special education leader must be well versed in order to lead special education programs.

The areas in which participating administrators were asked to rate themselves were: child find requirements; referral process, free and appropriate public education; re-evaluation requirements, individual education programs, due process procedures; least restrictive environment, confidentiality, program standards, extended school year, surrogate parent requirements, mediation and hearings, complaint procedures, secondary transition, private school placement, and home schooling. Out of the 187 individuals who completed the survey, one participant skipped this question entirely, and four chose to respond only to specific items. A total of 182 responded to the entire question (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

Building Principal and Assistant Principal Rating of Understanding Special Education Regulations

Regulation	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Responses
Child Find	12.64%	26.92%	47.80%	12.64%	182
Referral Process	00.00%	9.29%	67.12%	23.50%	183
FAPE	00.00%	4.35%	63.59%	32.07%	184
Re-Evaluation	1.09%	25.00%	57.61%	16.30%	184
IEPs	00.00%	03.26%	65.76%	30.98%	184
Due Process	00.00%	24.46%	53.26%	22.26%	184
LRE	00.00%	5.43%	66.30%	28.26%	184
Confidentiality	00.00%	0.54%	38.59%	60.87%	184
Program Standards	01.09%	30.43%	54.89%	13.59%	184
Surrogate Parent	25.41%	43.78%	27.03%	3.78%	185
Mediation & Hearings	3.24%	49.19%	37.30%	10.27%	185
Complaint Procedures	2.72%	42.93%	40.76%	13.59%	185
Secondary Transition	8.65%	50.81%	34.05%	6.49%	185
Private School	24.19%	48.92%	21.51%	5.38%	186
Home School	15.14%	43.24%	33.51%	08.11%	185

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

School principals and assistant principals are leaders of all programs within their buildings, including special education. Administrators are responsible for ensuring the

implementation of special education rules and regulations from both the federal and state levels. An administrator can be considered unprepared to lead special education if (s)he is unaware of, or does not understand, the specific requirements of a regulation. An administrator can be considered prepared to lead special education if (s)he can ensure the implementation of the regulation and/or could provide professional development about the regulations. The information from Table 4.5 was therefore collapsed from four columns to two, to indicate the numbers of respondents who were unprepared or prepared to provide leadership with regard to specific special education regulation (see Table 4.6). This information was further broken down and incorporated into a bar graph to show the differences in principals' and assistant principals' preparedness to lead special education programs within their respective schools (see Figure 4.1).

Table 4.6

Building Administrators Prepared to Lead Special Education

Regulation	Unprepared	Prepared
Child Find	39.56%	60.44%
Referral Process	09.29%	90.62%
FAPE	04.35%	95.66%
Re-evaluation	26.09%	73.91%
IEPs	03.26%	96.74%
Due Process	24.46%	75.52%
LRE	05.43%	94.56%
Confidentiality	00.54%	99.43%

Program Standards	31.52%	68.48%
Surrogate Parents	69.19%	30.81%
Mediation & Hearings	52.43%	47.57%
Secondary Transition	59.46%	40.54%
Complaint Procedures	45.65%	54.26%
Private School	73.11%	26.89%
Home Schooling	58.38%	41.62%

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

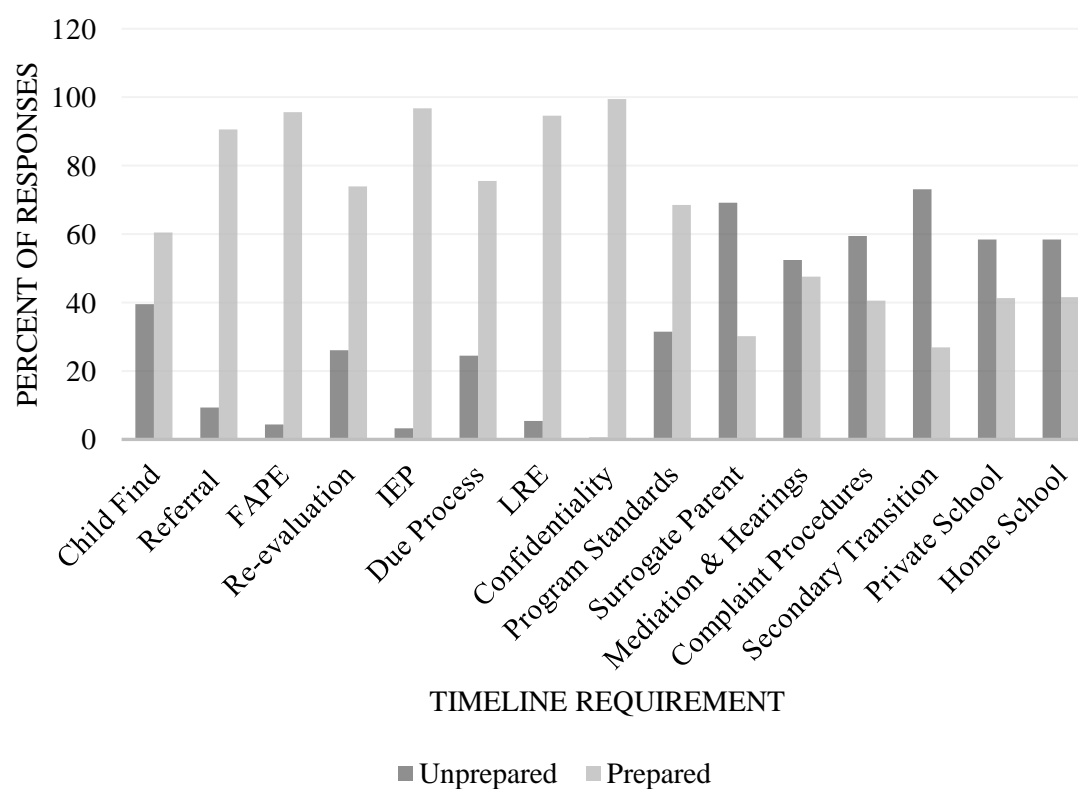


Figure 4.1. Administrator preparedness to lead special education within their school building.

Child Find. Although not the exclusive responsibility of elementary administrators, Child Find requires that all children within a district's borders who are in

need of special education services be identified (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Child Find most often occurs at the elementary level, since that is when potential learning challenges have the first opportunity to present themselves. There are exceptions to this, though, and students who require services that they had not previously received can exist at any level of the educational system. Consequently, all administrators must be well versed on Child Find requirements.

One hundred eighty-two principals and assistant principals rated their levels of understanding about Child Find requirements on the following scale: (1) unaware of this requirement; (2) aware of this requirement but do not understand the specific regulations within the requirement; (3) understand this requirement and can ensure appropriate implementation of this regulation; and (4) fully understand this requirement and could provide professional development of this regulation (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7

Principals' and Assistant Principals' Responses re: Child Find

School Level	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Number of Respondents
Elementary	09.88%	24.69%	51.85%	13.58%	81
Middle	13.33%	30.00%	56.67%	0%	30
Junior High	06.35%	18.75%	68.75%	06.35%	16
High School	22.49% %	26.53%	36.73%	14.29%	49
Other	0%	0%	33.33%	66.67%	6

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case 100%.

An administrator is unprepared to fulfill her/his responsibilities under a particular special education regulation if (s)he is unaware of, or does not understand, the specific requirements of that regulation. An administrator is prepared to lead special education if (s)he can ensure the implementation of that regulation, and/or could provide professional development about the regulation (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8

Principals' and Assistant Principals' Preparedness to Lead re: Child Find

School Level	Unprepared	Prepared
Elementary	34.57%	65.43%
Middle	43.33%	56.67%
Junior High	25.10%	74.90%
High School	49%	51%
Other	0%	100%

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

Secondary Transition. Transition plans must be in place for students by the time a student for whom an IEP has been written turns 16 years of age (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). It stands to reason that junior and senior high school building level administrators should have a complete understanding of this special education regulation. A total of 68 junior high and high school building level administrators responded to this item – 17 from the junior high level, 51 from the high school level. The respondents rated their levels of understanding about secondary transition requirements on the following scale: (1) unaware of this requirement, (2) aware of this requirement but do not

understand the specific regulations within the requirement, (3) understand this requirement and can ensure appropriate implementation of this regulation, and (4) fully understand this requirement and could provide professional development of this regulation (see Table 4.9).

Table 4.9

Junior and High School Principals' and Assistant Principals' Responses to Secondary Transition Plans

School Level	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Number of Respondents
Junior High	05.88%	52.94%	41.18%	00.00%	17
High School	01.96%	37.25%	45.16%	15.69%	51

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

An administrator can be said to be unprepared to lead in the secondary transition aspect of special education if (s)he is unaware of, or does not understand, the specific requirements regarding that regulation. Conversely, an administrator can be said to be prepared to lead in that aspect of special education if (s)he can ensure the implementation of the regulation and/or could provide professional development about it (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10

Junior and High School Principals' and Assistant Principals' Preparedness to Lead Secondary Transition Plans

School Level	Unprepared	Prepared
Junior High	58.82%	41.18%
High School	39.21%	60.85%

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

Administrators' preparedness to ensure adherence to special education

timelines. IDEA and Arkansas State Rules and Regulations have specific timeline requirements for various procedures. Each participant was asked to rate her/his individual level of understanding of timeline requirements according to the following scale: (1) unaware of this timeline requirement, (2) aware of this requirement but am not sure about the specific timeline, or (3) fully understand this timeline requirement. The areas to which participants were asked to respond were: scheduling a referral conference, conducting a referral conference decision meeting, right to notice, evaluation testing, evaluation programming conference decision meeting, implementation of the IEP, IEP annual review, re-evaluation, manifestation determination meeting, and homebound IEP reviews. All 187 participants responded to this section of the survey in its entirety (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.11

Principals' and Assistant Principals' Responses re: Special Education Timeline Requirements

Timeline	(1)	(2)	(3)	Number of Respondents
Scheduling a referral meeting	00.53%	38.50%	60.96%	187
Referral Conference decision meeting	00.53%	37.97%	61.50%	187
Right to Notice	02.14%	35.83%	62.03%	187
Evaluation Testing	00.53%	42.78%	56.68%	187
Evaluation programming	01.07%	43.32%	55.61%	187

decision meeting				
Implementation of the IEP	00.53%	28.88%	70.59%	187
IEP annual review	00.00%	27.81%	72.19%	187
Re-evaluation	00.00%	37.63%	62.37%	186
Manifestation determination meeting	02.14%	51.34%	46.52%	187
Homebound IEP Reviews	14.44%	55.08%	30.48%	187

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

Administrators must be prepared to lead special education teams to meet required timelines under IDEA and Arkansas state regulations. An administrator who is not prepared is either unaware of a timeline requirement, or does not know what the timeline requirement is for a specific regulation. An administrator who is prepared to lead special education fully understands specific timelines (see Table 4.12). The information from Table 2.2 was used to create a bar graph that compares the level of preparedness for each specific special education timeline requirement (see Figure 4.2).

Table 4.12

Building Administrators' Preparedness to Ensure Adherence to Special Education Timeline Requirements

Timeline	Unprepared	Prepared
Scheduling a referral meeting	39.03%	60.96%
Referral Conference decision meeting	38.50%	61.50%
Right to Notice	37.97%	62.03%
Evaluation Testing	43.31%	56.68%

Evaluation programming decision meeting	44.39%	55.61%
Implementation of the IEP	29.41%	70.59%
IEP annual review	27.81%	72.19%
Re-evaluation	37.63%	62.37%
Manifestation determination meeting	53.48%	46.52%
Homebound IEP reviews	69.52%	30.48%

Note. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

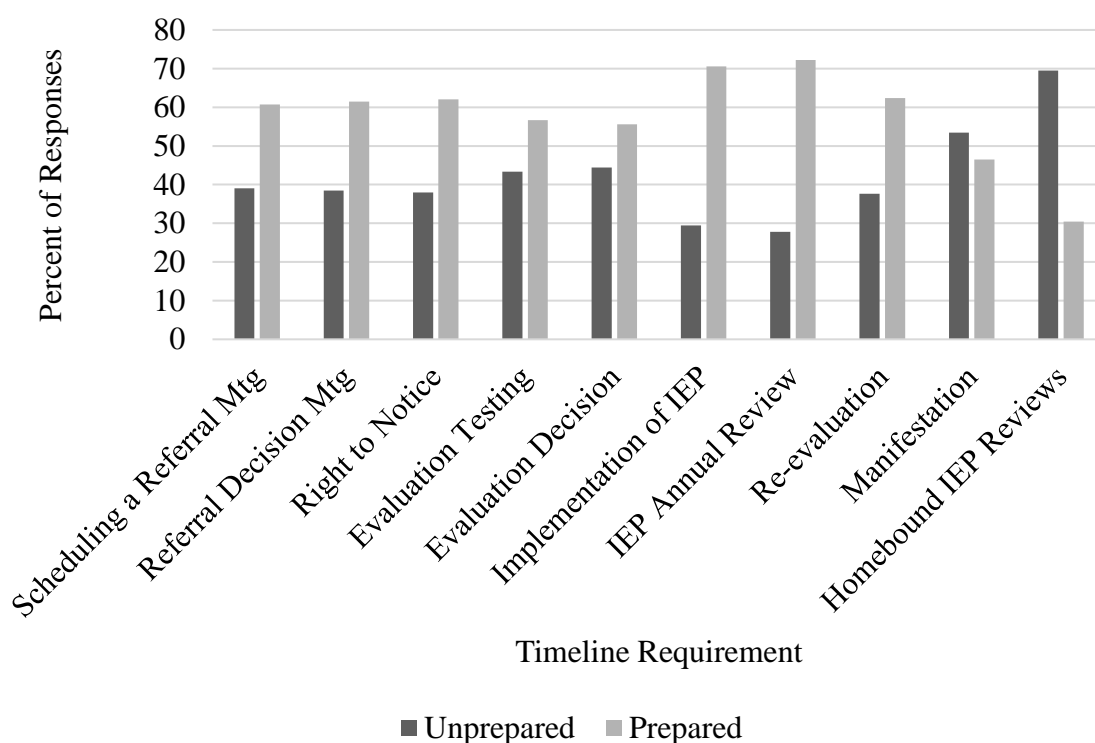


Figure 4.2. A comparison of building administrator's preparedness to lead adherence to special education timeline requirements.

Principals' and assistant principals' understanding of special education.

Administrators were asked to respond two open-ended questions at the end of the survey.

The first question (To what do you attribute your understanding of special education?) received 186 responses. Twenty individuals responded to this question by stating that they were either former special education teachers or former special education supervisors. They attributed their understanding of special education to their having earned degrees in special education and having become licensed to teach in that field.

Six respondents attributed their understanding of special education rules and regulations to additional college classes or course work that they had undertaken. One of these individuals specifically mentioned having taken a course in special education law.

Experience was listed 46 separate times to explain respondents' understanding of special education. Experience was described variously as observation, on the job training, support from district-level special education leaders, and having been involved in specific cases. In describing the source of her understanding of special education, one individual cited, "My own experience and research. Never have I been trained." Another described having learned about special education from, "On the job experience and talking with SPED folks." Still another person attributed her/his understanding, not only to her/his own experience, but also to having a spouse who is a special educator. One described having "learned through observation and experience." Six attributed their understanding of special education rules and regulations to their frequently having attended IEP conference meetings.

Ongoing professional development was mentioned 10 times as a source of respondents' understanding of special education. This professional development included that which was afforded by the school district, as well as that which was made available through regional educational cooperatives. District level special education

personnel and building level special education coordinators were also included as instrumental in supporting principals' and assistant principals' understanding of special education. One respondent credited, "Outstanding leadership and professional development early in my career that provided me with the knowledge needed to work in the special education area. Also, experience as a teacher and principal." Another explained, "I attribute my level of understanding to strong teacher leaders and a change in special education supervisors. They have provided several avenues of support and professional development that has improved my knowledge."

Support from special education supervisors and special education coordinators was mentioned in seven individual responses. One participating building-level administrator explained, "I have a good working knowledge of the requirements. I rely on our special education supervisor to give me the information I need to make sure we are doing what we need to do for students and parents." Some respondents also attribute on-the-job support from fellow building-level administrators. One assistant principal, for example, cited "Support from the district level, my sped supervisor, [and] fellow APs."

Three respondents shared that their knowledge had been gained as a result of more personal circumstances. Each of these individuals reported having had or currently having a child in special education programs. One explained, "I have a child that went through this program and want to make sure students receive the most from their educational opportunities." Two others explained that their understanding of special education came through family members who were involved in special education professionally. "My mother and wife are both special education teachers," shared one of those two respondents.

These responses make clear that most of the participants attribute their understanding of special education rules and regulations to collaboration with others, attendance at meetings, continual support from special education supervisors, and – in some cases – prior experience as a special education professional. For responding administrators who had not earned degrees in special education, only one mentioned having completed a special education law class in preparation for becoming a building-level administrator. Most of the respondents attributed their knowledge about special education rules, regulations, and requirements, not to any coursework that they had completed, but to what they had learned while on the job.

Becoming better prepared to lead special education programs. The second of the two open-ended questions to which participating building-level administrators were asked to respond was: What would help principals and assistant principals become better prepared to lead special education programs? This question was answered by 181 respondents.

Seventy-one respondents cited principals' and assistant principals' need for professional development and training to become effective leaders of special education. One respondent recommended the development of a training manual: "A training manual with specific information necessary for supervising a Special Education program. Not the entire rules and regs, just the parts required for supervisory purposes." Another suggested the creation of an "electronic data base of answers to common questions." This individual went on to suggest the establishment of "a special education office that is available to support building questions and sped decisions." Others described training as necessary on a yearly basis, while others suggested continuous training. One participant

proposed, “Continuous training and Kahoot quizzes on these trainings so that an individual could earn district certifications in SPED/504.” The need for professional development to be specific was mentioned by numerous respondents. One individual asserted, “TRAINING! We do not receive near enough training on the specifics. I have only received training on accommodations and modifications.”

Experience with special education processes as a means to becoming prepared to be a leader of special education was mentioned by seven respondents. For some, experience alone was not considered adequate; it needed to be paired with professional development. Two individuals even went so far as to suggest that experience as a special education teacher ought to be a requirement for becoming a principal or assistant principal: “Having to be a SPED teacher at least one to three years. Experience provides more training than seminars”; “To have been a special education teacher before moving into a leadership role.”

Eleven individuals wrote about post-secondary course work in special education in their responses. Some suggested that certain levels or amounts of course work ought to be required (“Taking 12 to 18 hours of special education classes”), while others proposed more specificity within the course work (“College programs need to embed into the SPED college courses information about state and local decisions and timelines as it refers to Special Education”). Two felt that some “hand on” involvement would be helpful – for example, being involved in the special education process during the pre-service administrative internship, or shadowing someone in the special education designee role for a few full days.

Nine respondents proposed that some written materials be prepared to help principals and assistant principals to navigate special education rules and regulations. One suggested a short but meaningful weekly newsletter. Three proposed creating a “cheat sheet or checklist” to help clarify special education requirements. Three others felt that a handbook of timelines and regulations would be helpful (“A beginners guide to Special Education, an overview of regulations and timelines”). One other proposed the creation of a question and answer document that would be continually updated with new information.

Summary

While most principals and assistant principals enter into their administrative roles without having had backgrounds in special education, they nevertheless assume responsibility for leading the special education programs of the schools that they are engaged to lead. Many administrators lean on special education teachers and special education supervisors for support in ensuring that program requirements and regulations are satisfied. From the data collected for this investigation, it is clear that administrators need and want ongoing training in the area of special education rules and regulations that is specific and meaningful. It is likewise clear that many also think that coursework about special education policies and procedures would have been helpful prior to their having become administrators.

Chapter V: Discussion

Principals and assistant principals are the educational leaders of public school buildings. They are required to oversee every aspect of the school, including supporting teachers and ensuring that each student receives the free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to which (s)he is entitled. Yet, principals and assistant principals too often feel ill prepared to be true leaders of their schools' special education programs (Christensen et al., 2013).

For this study, a survey was developed to determine the levels of understanding that current Arkansas building-level administrators possess regarding the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) and Arkansas state special education rules and regulations. In the survey, whose link was emailed to all of the principals and assistant principals listed in the 2017-2018 Directory of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (2017), building-level administrators were also asked to provide information about their years of service, and to identify whatever supports they would need in order to feel that they had a sufficient working knowledge of regulations and timelines to be leaders of special education programs.

Experience Levels

Of the 187 principals and assistant principals who completed the survey, the majority (43.32%) reported having between one and five years of experience as building-level administrators. Another 25.13% reported having between six and 10 years of such experience. The remaining 31.55% reported having anywhere from 11 to 20+ years of experience as building-level administrators.

When specifically asked for how long they had held their current position, the majority (70.05%) indicated that they had been in their current job for between one and five years, with the rest (29.95%) representing a range of tenure from six to 20+ years.

Reflection upon these reported experience levels raises concerns regarding principal turnover rates. Administrator leadership sets the tone for any school building, and can impact teacher turnover and student outcomes. Typically, it takes about five years for a principal to put her/his vision in place (Superville, 2014). Much research has been conducted regarding principal turnover rates. More than half leave within the first five years of becoming a principal (Schulzke, 2015). Only 30% of high school principals stay for three years, and less than half of middle school principals remain for up to five years (Fuller, 2012). “One reason principals turn over so rapidly is that their roles are both ill-defined and overwhelming;” principals are expected to be “a business manager, a CEO, instructional manager and discipline person” (Schulzke, 2015).

This information is crucially important, considering that 43.32% of the respondents to the survey in this study were within their first five years of experience as building-level administrators. If they are not equipped to lead all levels of their school buildings, including their special education programs, they could add to the already high turnover of principals. Worse still, by being ill-prepared to lead special education programs, they could continue – even exacerbate – Arkansas’ already long-standing problem in retaining special education teachers.

Special Education Designee

Respondents self-identified as principals or assistant principals, with 100 (or 53.76%) identifying as principals, and 86 (or 46.24%) as assistant principals. The largest

number of respondents (43.85%) reported working at the elementary school level, with most of the rest reporting that they work at the middle school (16.04%), junior high (9.09%), or high school (27.27%) levels, and few (3.74%) reporting that they lead school buildings with other than typical grade-level configurations. The web-based survey platform rounded some figures, so they may not total in every case to 100%.

As it is not unusual for assistant principals to serve as special education designees within their respective school buildings, participating assistant principals were asked to identify whether they served in their capacity in their own schools. In response to this item, 36.29% of the participating assistant principals indicated that they are their schools' special education designees, while 63.71% reported that that is not a role that has been assigned to them. While principals were expected – indeed, instructed – to skip this question, 37 nevertheless chose to respond to it. Of the principals who responded, 29 (or 78.38%) indicated that they are not their schools' special education designee. This finding, while quite unanticipated, is enormously concerning, since – even in schools where assistant principals are designated to oversee day-to-day operations of special education programs – principals are ultimately responsible for leading every aspect of their buildings.

Number of Students Receiving Special Education Services

Respondents to this survey were asked to report the approximate number of students in their schools who receive special education services. The greatest number of respondents (33.69%) reported leading schools with between 26 and 50 such students. The next most frequently selected response (23.53%) from participants was that their schools served between 51 and 75 youngsters with special needs. The third most

frequently selected response (21.39%) was that participants led schools that served between one and 25 students with special needs. Only 10.16% of participants reported serving in schools with between 76 and 100 students with special needs. Not surprisingly, given the relatively small number of schools in Arkansas with very large student bodies, only 9.07% of participants indicated that their schools' populations of students with special needs were between 101 and 250 or more students. Four respondents (or 2.14%) acknowledged not knowing the number of students receiving special education services within their buildings. Overall, this is positive information, as the clear majority of administrators know the approximate numbers of students within their buildings who receive special education services. One explanation as to why this number is so appropriately high is that this information must be provided from each school to the special education offices of its respective school district, which in turn must forward the information on to the Arkansas Department of Education by December 1 of each year. The information is used for Cycle 4 data reporting to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which in turn uses the data for maintenance of effort (MOE) district budgets (Keys, 2016).

Preparedness to Lead Special Education

Participants in this investigation were asked to rate themselves according to how prepared they felt to provide leadership in a variety of special education requirement areas: child find, referral, FAPE, re-evaluation, Individual Education Programs (IEP), Due Process, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), confidentiality, Extended School Year (ESY), program standards, surrogate parents, mediation and hearings, compliance procedures, secondary transition, and private and homeschool requirements. For each of

these areas, respondents rated themselves on the following scale: unaware of this requirement, aware of this requirement but do not understand the specific regulations within the requirement, understand this requirement and can ensure appropriate implementation of this regulation, and fully understand this requirement and could provide professional development of this regulation.

When an administrator can ensure compliance within their building, or if they understand the regulation well enough to provide professional development about it, they would be considered prepared to lead special education within the school building. If a principal or assistant principal is unaware of a regulation, or does not understand all aspects of the regulation, they could be considered unprepared to lead that aspect of special education.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality is the only area where all but 0.54% of the respondents reported themselves as prepared to lead special education programs. This is positive, since all special education records must always be kept confidential. Special education files fall under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA). “Any record, such as a permanent record, report card, a student’s work, or teacher’s grade book, is an education record under FERPA if it is maintained by a school and directly related to a student” (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008).

Individual education program process. In ranked order of feeling prepared, right behind confidentiality, is IEPs. Over 96% of the respondents reported feeling prepared with regards to IEPs, meaning that only slightly more than three percent felt themselves unprepared to lead the IEP process. Overall, this again is a good sign since a representative of the school, usually the building administrator, must be present at IEP

meetings as a team member. That individual's role is "to be knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency" (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008, pp. Section 8, pg. 5). This means that 96.74% felt they could indeed carry out this role for special education IEP meetings in their schools.

Free and appropriate public education. An impressive 95.66% of respondents felt confident that they could ensure that FAPE was being provided to all students receiving special education services in their school. FAPE ensures that all students receiving special education and related services will have them provided to them at public expense, that they will meet state standards, and that all of their IEP requirements will be satisfied (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). At first glance, this result appears to be positive, as it implies that the principals and assistant principals feel that they can ensure the provision of all aspects of FAPE. FAPE, though, is overarching; it incorporates IEP, least restrictive environment (LRE), extended school year (ESY), program standards, Child Find, the referral process, re-evaluation, annual IEP reviews, and adherence to all special education timelines. As the results below show, it cannot safely be assumed that principals and assistant principals who rate themselves as prepared to lead FAPE are indeed prepared to ensure that all of its component provisions are provided.

Least restrictive environment. Of the respondents, 94.56% felt they were prepared to ensure that students receiving special education services did so in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE is essential to ensuring that students are placed to the maximum extent appropriate with their non-disabled peers. With 94.56% of participating principals and assistant principals rating themselves as prepared to lead this

aspect of special education, one can assume that these building leaders make sure that all students with special education services are given the opportunity to participate within general education programs, and that the students are not isolated in self-contained special education programs.

Referral process. The special education referral process was the area in which responding principals and assistant principals expressed the next highest level of preparedness to lead. Of the respondents, 90.62% felt prepared to conduct referrals. This process is not limited to elementary schools, but referrals to special education often begin at the elementary level. Of the 82 elementary principals and assistant principals who participated in this investigation, 91.46% felt prepared to provide leadership in the area of special education referrals.

While over 90% of respondents expressed feeling prepared to lead their schools' special education programs in the areas of confidentiality, IEPs, FAPE, LRE, and the special education referral process, participants did not report feeling prepared to lead other areas of special education in anything approaching those numbers. The remaining aspects of special education yielded responses of 75.52% or below, indicating one-fourth or more of participating building-level administrators felt unprepared to provide leadership in the areas of due process, re-evaluation, extended school year (ESY), program standards, Child Find, complaint procedures, mediation and hearings, home schooling, secondary transition, surrogate parents, and private school.

Child Find. Child Find is the assurance that all children between the ages of birth to 21 years of age are "identified, located and evaluated, regardless of the severity of their disability" (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008, pp. Section 3.00, p. 1).

Only 60.44% of survey respondents felt prepared to ensure that child find is conducted, yet 90.62% had expressed feeling prepared to lead in the area of referrals. As referrals are the direct results of Child Find efforts, this finding implies that respondents' self-ratings regarding the referral process are somewhat inflated.

Program standards. Of the participating principals and assistant principals, 68.48% expressed that they felt prepared to ensure that program standards are in place for students with disabilities. Within program standards, schools are to ensure that students with disabilities are provided an education to the maximum extent appropriate within the general education setting (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Curiously, while 94.56% felt they were indeed prepared to ensure that students received their education in this least restrictive environment (LRE), only 68.48% indicated that they were prepared to ensure the implementation of program standards. This difference of 26.08% begs the question of whether participants are indeed as prepared to lead education in the LRE as they think themselves to be, or whether they might be somewhat better prepared than they realize to address the program standards more broadly.

Extended school year services. Better than 96% of respondents indicated that they felt they were prepared to lead the IEP process. IEPs are considered the guiding program for all students with disabilities. These programs must include goals and objectives, schedules of services, decisions about whether or not an extended school year (ESY) is necessary, consideration of secondary transition, and LRE. During the IEPs process, ESY must be considered annually. ESY and IEPs are provided to ensure FAPE for all students with disabilities (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the respondents, only 63.59% felt prepared to lead the ESY section of the IEP. This reflects a

difference of 33.15% between those who felt prepared to lead the ESY section and those who felt prepared in the area of IEPs generally, and a difference of 32.07% between it and their preparedness to provide FAPE to all of their students.

Secondary transition services. The participants in this investigation included 51 high school and 17 junior high school building administrators, all of whom responded to the survey item regarding secondary transition services. Secondary transition plans are part of students' IEPs and must be in place for each student with disabilities by the time of her/his 16th birthday. The purpose of a secondary transition plan is to write post-secondary goals for students related to training, education, employment and independent living skills (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Writing a transition plan becomes the responsibility for junior high school and high school IEP teams. Of the 51 high school principals and assistant principals who participated in this investigation, 100% reported feeling prepared to lead IEP teams; of those, 60.79% indicated feeling as though they could lead the secondary transition process. Of the 17 junior high school principals and assistant principals who participated, 94% felt prepared to lead the IEP process; of those, 41.18% reported feeling prepared to lead the secondary transition process. The difference between those building-level administrators who felt prepared to lead the IEP process and those who felt prepared to lead the secondary transition process was 39.21% for high school administrators, and 52.82% for those at the junior high school level.

Re-evaluation. A re-evaluation must be considered, at a minimum, every three years for every student receiving special education services. The purpose of a re-evaluation is to determine updated educational information, changes in service needs,

and/or changes in a student's eligibility for services. Based on re-evaluation information, new IEPs are developed to include all new individual special education service needs (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the respondents, 73.91% felt prepared to lead the re-evaluation process for special education in their buildings. That means that 26.09% did not feel prepared to lead this section of the special education process. Since IEPs are based on evaluative information gathered in the re-evaluation process, it is concerning that more than one-fourth of the respondents do not feel adequately prepared to lead re-evaluations.

Surrogate parents. When a child is a ward of the state, when a parent cannot be located, or when a child is an unaccompanied homeless youth, it is the responsibility of district- and building-level administrators to determine if a student is need of a surrogate parent. Surrogate parents are used to protect the rights of children. A surrogate parent takes the place of a parent at all special education meetings, including IEP meetings, and ensures the provision of FAPE (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the survey respondents, 69.19% of the building principals and assistant principals feel unprepared to lead this section of federal and state regulations regarding special education. This could mean that some special education meetings are being held without appropriate parent representation for students requiring the services of surrogate parents.

Complaint procedures. Complaints can be filed against a district whenever an individual or agency feels that state or federal special education rules and regulations are being violated. The complainant must list the allegations against the district, citing specific facts of violations with respect to a specific student receiving special education services. Within 60 calendar days, a team from the Arkansas Department of Education

will conduct an investigation (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). The school district (or building) must be prepared to provide data, including any files, and to allow faculty and staff members to participate in interviews. Of the survey respondents, only 54.26% felt they are prepared to lead a building through this process, meaning that remaining 45.65% – nearly half of the respondents – did not feel prepared.

Mediation and hearings. When a hearing is filed, it is up to the school district (building) to respond within 10 days of the due process complaint. An explanation must be provided to clarify action taken by an IEP team. This must include actions considered and rejected, and the information used to make those determinations. This information includes any “evaluations, assessments, records, and reports” (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008, pp. Section 10, p. 9). Within 15 days of a parent’s due process complaint, the resolution process begins. This is a process where members of the IEP team and parents meet. During this meeting, resolutions are discussed and can be arbitrated by a mediator if both parties agree (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). If principals and assistant principals are not prepared in all aspects of special education, their decisions – however well intended – could result in complaints being filed. If that does happen, building administrators must follow the process as described by Arkansas rules and regulations. Of the survey respondents, only 47.57% felt prepared to lead in this area of the special education process, meaning that 52.43% – more than half – felt unprepared to provide leadership in this area of state regulations.

Home schooling. Regulations have been promulgated in Arkansas for the home schooling of children. Disabled students who are home schooled, like those who attend private schools, must be given the opportunity access special education within the district

in which they reside. This means that students who do not typically attend a particular public school may nevertheless access some special education services at that school. Home schooled students with disabilities retain all special education rights under IDEA (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Despite that, only 41.62% of the building-level administrators surveyed felt prepared to lead special education programs for students who participate in home schooling.

Private school. When students with disabilities are parentally placed in private school settings, it remains the local school district's responsibility to "locate, identify, and evaluate all children enrolled" in this type of setting. Once a student with a disability is identified, the local district is responsible to develop a service plan to help support the student's educational process (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). This process could include some direct instruction and related services that the student with a disability may need, depending on allocated funds set aside by the serving district. Oftentimes, the principals and assistant principals are not directly involved in developing service plans, but they still can be involved in utilizing their teaching staff to provide these services to students who attend private schools. Of the survey respondents, only 26.89% felt prepared to lead special education programs for students with disabilities who are attending school in the private school setting. This means that 73.11%, nearly three-fourths, did not feel prepared.

Timelines. Adherence to special education timelines ensures that students are receiving due process and FAPE. There are specific timelines within the Arkansas special education state regulations that all educators are required to follow. It is expected

that building administrators are prepared to ensure that all timelines are followed and implemented.

Referral. When a student is referred to special education, a meeting must be scheduled within seven days of that referral, and a meeting must be held within 21 days of receipt of the referral (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the survey respondents, 60.96% felt prepared to schedule the referral meeting, and 39.03% were unsure of the required timeline. When it came to the referral conference itself, 61.5% understood the timeline of 21 days, and 38.5% did not fully know when a referral conference would need to be held. It is concerning that well over one-third of the respondents were unsure of either timeline, as this is where the special education process begins for all students. If timelines are not followed, potential special education services could be delayed.

Right to notice. Parents of students with disabilities have the right to notice. This includes notices for meetings to be conducted, notices of action that explain the proposed action a district plans to take, and procedural safeguards notices. All of these notices fall under the area of due process protections for students with disabilities. Of the respondents, 62.03% felt that they could ensure that right to notice timelines are met, meaning that 37.97% were not sure of these timelines. The fact that 75.52% of respondents had expressed feeling prepared to lead special education in the area of due process, but that only 62.03% felt that they could ensure adherence to right to notice timelines, means that 13.49% who felt that they were prepared to lead in the area of due process may in fact not be.

Evaluation testing and evaluation programming conference decision. If a committee determines that an evaluation is necessary for a student, the committee then has up to 60 calendar days to complete the testing. Once the last component of the evaluation is completed, the committee then has 30 days to schedule and hold an evaluation programming decision conference. These timelines are in place to ensure that students with disabilities are provided due process and FAPE (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the respondents, 56.68% reported being able to ensure that evaluation testing timelines are met, and 55.61% reported being able to ensure that evaluation programming conference decisions are held within the appropriate timeline allocation. That means that 43.31 % of the respondents were unsure of the timeline requirements for evaluation, and that 44.39% were unsure of the evaluation programming conference decision timelines. Without adherence to these timelines, special education services could be delayed, impacting FAPE, and exposing the school and district to complaints and/or litigation.

Implementation of the IEP and IEP annual review. When it is determined that a student needs special education and related services, an IEP must be written. The IEP details the programming that will be provided for the student to ensure FAPE and due process (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the respondents, 70.59% expressed that they could ensure that a student's IEP would be implemented as required by Arkansas state regulations. This means that 29.41% of building principals and assistant principals were unsure of implementation timeline requirements. Once an IEP is in place for a student with disabilities, it must be reviewed at least annually. Of the respondents, 72.19% could ensure that IEPs would be reviewed annually. This means that

27.81% of building administrators were unsure of the annual review requirement. An IEP encompasses all the programming and educational needs for a student with a disability. If an IEP is not implemented or reviewed within the required timelines, then the student is in danger of not receiving an appropriate education. This in turn could mean a denial of FAPE and due process.

Re-evaluation. Students with disabilities who receive special education services are re-evaluated at least every three years. This re-evaluation must include a review of existing data to determine whether additional testing is necessary to determine continued eligibility, educational programming, and/or additional services (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). By conducting re-evaluations, the IEP committee is ensuring appropriate programming for a student with disabilities. This directly impacts FAPE and due process for a student. Of the respondents, 62.37% understood the re-evaluation timeline requirement, which means that 37.63% – over one-third – were unsure of re-evaluation timelines. Earlier, though, 73.91% of building principals and assistant principals indicated that they felt prepared to lead the re-evaluation process. Given the data specific to re-evaluation timelines, this means that far fewer than 73.91% actually fully understand the re-evaluation process. When re-evaluation timelines and processes are not followed, a student's IEP may not be written appropriately to meet his/her needs. If that is the case, then FAPE and due process may not be followed appropriately.

Manifestation determination meeting. Students with disabilities occasionally have disciplinary infractions that result in out of school suspensions. Discipline procedures for students with disabilities are very clear, and require a committee to meet no later than the 10th day of consecutive or cumulative out of school suspension

(Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). The purpose of a manifestation determination meeting is to determine whether the student's behavior that precipitated the out of school suspension was a manifestation of her/his disability. Once that is determined by a committee, further action must be taken to ensure that FAPE and due process are provided (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the respondents in the present study, 46.52% of the building principals and assistant principals felt that they could ensure that manifestation determination meetings are held within required timelines. This means that 53.48% of the building administrators – more than half – are unsure of the required timelines. If manifestation determination meetings are not held within the appropriate timeline, changes of placement will have occurred without appropriate programming and solutions being implemented by an IEP committee. This means that a student will not have received FAPE or due process (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008).

Homebound IEP reviews. There are times when a student with a disability has been removed from the public school setting due to discipline or medical issues. When this is the case, an IEP is written to provide services in a homebound setting. These IEPs must be reviewed every three months to ensure that this type of setting is still necessary for the student to make progress toward IEP goals, and to progress from grade to grade (Arkansas Department of Education, 2008). Of the respondents, only 30.48% of the building principals and assistant principals felt that they could ensure that these timelines are met. That means that 69.52% cannot ensure that homebound IEPs are reviewed as required. If these IEPs are not reviewed as required, a student may not be provided FAPE and due process as required by state and federal regulations.

Interpretation of Findings

Special education regulations are intertwined. When a principal or assistant principal expresses that (s)he feels prepared to lead special education regarding FAPE and due process, (s)he is, by implication, stating (s)he is prepared to adhere to all special education regulations, including timeline requirements. Child Find, the referral process, re-evaluation, IEPs, LRE, confidentiality, ESY, program standards, the need for surrogate parents, secondary transition, complaint procedures, mediations and hearings are all part and parcel of FAPE and due process. While 95.66% of participating principals and assistant principals reported feeling prepared to lead in the area of FAPE, items about only two of its component parts – IEPs and confidentiality – yielded responses that met or exceeded that percentage (see Figure 5.1).

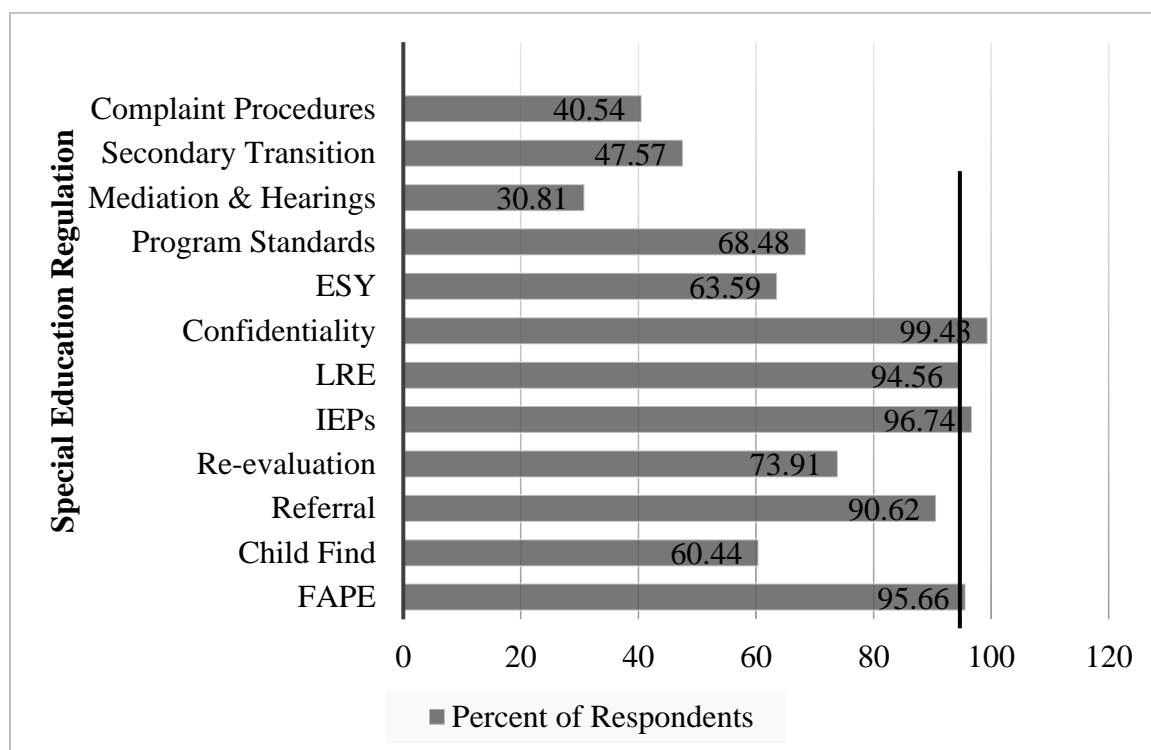


Figure 5.1. Building administrator preparedness compared to FAPE response.

Due process includes all procedural safeguards. Parents are to be provided notice, the right to participate in special education meetings, the right to evaluation, the right to file hearings and complaints, and the right to provide consent if a child qualifies for special education. While one might expect that the percentage of participating principals and assistant principals who reported feeling prepared to lead due process would be similar to their responses to items about other sections of the special education regulations, this was not the case. Participants rated their preparedness regarding referral, IEP, LRE, and confidentiality more highly than their preparedness to lead due process (see Figure 5.2). Conversely, they rated their preparedness regarding Child Find, re-evaluation, ESY, programs standards, mediation and hearings, secondary transition and complaint procedures less highly.

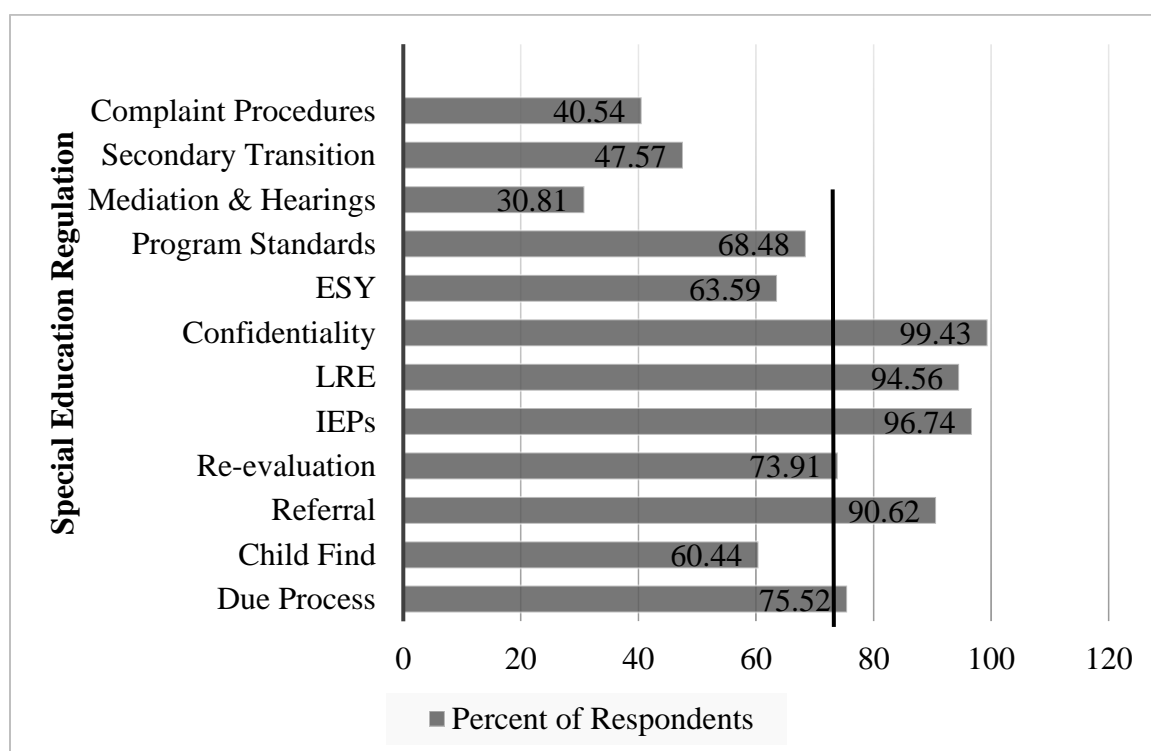


Figure 5.2. Building administrator preparedness compared to due process response.

These results reveal that participating principals and assistant principals possess only a partial understanding of Arkansas and federal special education rules and regulations. More telling, they illustrate that – while principals and assistant principals indicate a recognition of the importance of FAPE and due process, and while they report feeling prepared to lead their schools’ special education programs in those two areas – participating building-level administrators’ understanding of, and preparedness to provide leadership regarding, the component parts of FAPE and due process are incomplete. Building principals and assistant principals must have the knowledge and skills to lead all aspects of the special education programs within their school buildings; absent this, those programs may suffer, and students with disabilities may be denied FAPE or due process.

How Principals and Assistant Principals Learned About Special Education

All respondents to the survey reported having at least some knowledge regarding special education rules and regulations. Participating principals and assistant principals were asked to explain to what they attributed their understanding of special education requirements.

University programs for educational leadership are designed to prepare future administrators to lead all educational programs within a school building. This would lead one to think that preparation programs would include specific course work regarding students with disabilities, and that they would include instruction regarding state and federal requirements within special education in order to prepare principals and assistant principals to lead special education programs.

Of the 187 participants in this investigation, 186 responded to the item that asked participants to indicate to what they attributed their understanding of special education

requirements. Only six respondents (1.78%) identified university course work as the source of their understanding of special education requirements. While this does not mean that only six of the 187 participants had undertaken course work in special education during their university-based leadership-preparation programs, it does mean that nearly all of the participants – 98.22% of them, in fact – attributed their understanding of special education to sources and experiences other than those classes. Twenty respondents (or 10.75%), for example, identified that they had been special education teachers or supervisors prior to entering the position of principal or assistant principal. While these individuals would almost certainly have completed course work related to special education regulations and requirements, none specifically cited course work as having prepared them to lead special education. The majority of respondents attributed their knowledge of special education policies and procedures variously to ongoing professional development, district support, personal family connections to special education, and/or on-the-job experience. Eleven participating principals and assistant principals (or 5.91%) indicated that they rely on strong teachers to guide them in meeting special education regulations. These findings are potentially concerning, as they suggest that many principals and assistant principals assume responsibility for their schools – including their schools' special education programs – inadequately prepared to provide leadership in the area of special education.

These findings echo those obtained by Pazey and Cole (2012) in their investigation. Those scholars reviewed 97 administrator preparation programs in different states to determine whether special education law was required in those programs. Seventeen of the programs that they examined embedded special education

throughout the programs, and eight programs required a stand-alone special education law course. The remaining programs provided special education law courses only as electives (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Although no single course or series of course in special education law could ever be exhaustive, such a course would provide emerging school leaders with a working knowledge of special education requirements. Without access to this knowledge during their preparation programs, principals and assistant principals are at risk of being ill equipped to lead their schools' special education programs.

Absent proper leadership and guidance, school faculties can make mistakes in the special education process that both threaten students' rights to education and expose schools and districts to costly resolutions. Take, for example, the recent Supreme Court of the United States (2017) ruling in the *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*. This case was filed by a family against a school district for not providing an appropriate IEP for a student with disabilities (Supreme Court of the United States, 2017). The parents withdrew the child from the public school setting and enrolled him in a private school where he made "significant academic and social improvement" (McKenna, 2017). The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the parents stating, "a child's educational program must be appropriately ambitious in light of his circumstances and that every child should have the chance to meeting challenging objectives" (McKenna, 2017). The Supreme Court reinforced the notion that IEPs cannot be one size fits all, but must be built according to an individual student's strengths and weaknesses.

Principals and assistant principals are the leaders of all programs in their schools – not least, their special education programs. Without sufficient knowledge of special education requirements, building-level administrators could unwittingly lead their

faculties to design IEPs that fall short of helping students make adequate academic and social progress.

Equipping Principals and Assistant Principals to Lead Special Education Programs

Building administrators were asked to share what would help them become better prepared to be special education leaders in their building. Of the 187 survey respondents, 181 responded to this open-ended item. Two major themes emerged from participants' responses to this question: ongoing professional development and course work during administrator preparation programs.

Many of the respondents requested ongoing professional development, with workshops designed to discuss specific aspects of special education. Others asked for continued assistance through "cheat sheets" or other written supports. One individual even suggested that professional development be required for building administrators.

Another theme that emerged was the need for more course work at the university level. Several participants suggested that the program of study for emerging educational leaders should include course work in special education. One individual even suggested the need for 12 to 18 hours of required special education credits. Another person suggested that extensive involvement in special education processes should be required during emerging administrators' internship experiences.

It is evident from the findings of this investigation that principals and assistant principals in Arkansas are in need of additional support to be prepared to lead special education programs. In this, they are not unlike their peers from across the country, whose need for professional development in special education has long been well documented (Wakeman, 2006). The desire that so many of the participants in this

investigation expressed to receive such professional development is likewise consonant with what their peers in other states have articulated. Cooper (2012), for example, found that principals in Nebraska were keen to receive additional special education-specific training.

One type of special education-specific professional development that could be helpful to Arkansas principals is the “Principals Understanding how to Lead Special Education (PULSE)” model (Inglesby, 2014). According to Inglesby (2014), principals who have participated in PULSE have reported “increased efficaciousness, cultural proficiency and technical competence in regard to their leadership role for special education” (p. 75).

Ideally, Arkansas principals would be required to complete course work in special education during their preparation programs, with continued professional development once on the job. Special education is multifaceted, in that it encompasses multiple rules and regulations through IDEA and state requirements. Emerging case law regularly offers new interpretations and provides clarification of laws and regulations. Staying current in this ever-evolving field is imperative; these laws are written to ensure that students with disabilities are given the opportunity to engage in a free and appropriate public education like all other students.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to currently licensed principals and assistant principals in the state of Arkansas. Its findings are drawn from participating building administrators’ self-reported understanding of federal and state special education rules, regulations, and requirements. Of Arkansas’ 1712 practicing principals and assistant principals, 187

responded to the survey that was the basis of this study. Although this sample is somewhat small compared to the total number of practicing administrators, those who did choose to participate were from all across the state, represented buildings with all grade-level configurations and of all different sizes, and represented a range of years of experience.

Recommendations

This research serves to reinforce the notion that principals and assistant principals graduate from educational leadership preparation programs not fully prepared to lead the special education programs of the schools for which they assume responsibility. It is telling that only 1.78% of participants in this study identified their university course work as the primary source of their understanding of special education rules, regulations, and requirements. Nearly all (98.22%) of the respondents to the survey that was employed in this investigation reported having acquired their knowledge about special education from sources other than their university-based preparation programs. Indeed, the majority of respondents attributed what they knew about special education to what they had learned “on the job” through professional development, participation at IEP team meetings, independent reading, and a reliance upon strong special education teachers. While all of these “on the job” learning experiences are necessarily helpful, they are certainly not sufficient. They cannot take the place of principals’ and assistant principals’ walking into new leadership roles fully prepared to support faculty members, students’ families, and students – especially those who present with disabilities and require special education services and supports.

The recently promulgated Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) identify ten areas of school leaderships in which all building-level leaders must be effective. These are: mission, vision, and core values; ethics and professional norms; equity and cultural responsiveness; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; community of care and support for students; professional capacity of school personnel; professional community for teachers and staff; meaningful engagement of families and community; operations and management; and school improvement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2008). Importantly, the language of each individual standard expressly reasserts building-level leaders' obligation to ensure the "academic success and well-being of each student" (NBPEA, 2008).

In order to help guide IEP team meetings, to facilitate decisions like IEP services, to ensure students' placement in the LRE, to coordinate teachers' service-delivery schedules, and otherwise to reinforce within school communities the imperative that high expectations be held for all students, including those with disabilities, principals must have been effectively prepared (Fisher, 2012; Maxam & Henderson, 2013). As Wagner (2010) explains, "Principals are instrumental in ensuring the rights are protected and that educational opportunities result in a quality education" (p. 48). If principals and assistant principals are not equipped to do this, they cannot be said to satisfy the PSEL standards (NBPEA, 2008).

Pazey and Cole (2012) had asserted that the only way for principals to be better prepared to lead special education was for university-based administrator-preparation programs to be improved significantly. While the results of the present study do not address whether adjusting university-based programs is the only way to bring about the

necessary changes that are required in building-level leaders' preparedness to lead their school's special education programs, they do reinforce the prudence of revisiting – even enhancing – the course work that emerging school leaders do complete during their graduate programs. Smith (2011) identified that “principals with little special education experience had less favorable attitudes toward inclusion than those principals with moderate special education teaching experience” (p. 92). As not all emerging school leaders will have had extensive experience teaching youngsters with special needs, exposure to information about students with disabilities, as well as about special education rules, regulations, and requirements, during their university-based preparation programs would provide this necessary exposure. Indeed, this was borne out in a study, reported by Farris (2011), of Texas high school principals. Those who had been adequately prepared about special education issues during their university programs tended to have more positive attitudes about educating youngsters with disabilities in inclusive settings.

The “on the job” learning experiences that so many of the building-level administrators who participated in this study cited are no doubt valuable. They are not, however, sufficient. In order to know the kinds of issues to address, the kinds of questions to ask, and the kinds and quality of supports to seek out, new school leaders must first have had adequate training during their pre-service programs. While principals and assistant principals should certainly work alongside highly skilled special education staff members, they should not abdicate their responsibilities to them. Rather, they should ensure that they and their faculties remain abreast of the ever-evolving field of special education. In order to be able to do that, building-level administrators must come

to the work having had a solid foundation in this important aspect of educational leadership.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the need for principals and assistant principals to be fully prepared to lead all of their schools' programs, including special education, prior to assuming responsibility for those schools. As the academic and professional literature make abundantly clear, "Special education is the most legalized segment of P-12 schooling" (Zirkel, 2015, p. 263). Consonant with what has been written previously by other scholars (Fisher, 2012; Maxam & Henderson, 2013; Wagner, 2010), the participants in this investigation identified both a need for ongoing professional development in the area of special education, and regret at not having completed sufficient special education-related course work during their university-based preparation programs.

Principals and assistant principals bear heavy responsibilities as the educational leaders of their buildings. They must work to ensure the appropriate education of all of their students – not least, those who present with special needs. Without proper preparation, building-level administrators may unwittingly hinder the educational progress of students with disabilities, denying them FAPE and/or due process, and – in the process – placing their schools and districts at legal risk.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval



**Office of Sponsored Programs
and University Initiatives**

Administration Building, Room 207
1509 North Boulder Avenue
Russellville, Arkansas 72801

Office: 479-880-4327
www.atu.edu

12/6/17

To Whom It May Concern:

Petra Nelson's IRB application "Special Education Requirements and Logistics, Bridging the Gap of Understanding for School Leaders" is approved through December 6, 2020. The approval code is Nelson_120617.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Jeff Aulgur, Ed.D.

IRB Chair

Appendix B

Survey Instrument

Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in, An Understanding of Special Education Requirements Leadership Requirements, A Building Level Administrator Perspective Survey. Your response will help me complete the qualitative method design of my dissertation topic, understanding what school principals and assistant principals need to lead special education programs within their school building. This study is being completed through Arkansas Tech University, Advanced Leadership Studies. This title of this research is: Special Education Requirements and Logistics, Bridging the Gap of Understanding for School Leaders.

I will use the data to analyze principal's and assistant principal's level of understanding special education requirements and program leadership in my study. If you agree to take part in this study, the survey should take 20 minutes to complete. The benefits of participating in this study could be for guiding professional development to meet identified needs related to leading special education programs in Arkansas public schools.

Please be frank in your responses. There is no right or wrong response. I will keep your response confidential. No school district, school building or individual data will be collected. Responses will be recorded anonymously. Survey results will be stored in Arkansas Tech University's Advanced Studies Survey Monkey account. Analysis will be stored by the researcher in a safe place until June 1, 2018. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. No costs are associated to any participant of the study. No monetary compensation is provided for participation in the study. There is no research funding for this research study. If you choose to take part in this research, your major responsibilities will include responses to the survey items included in the survey link. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop taking part in the research at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Should you have any questions about this survey or regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact me at pnelson5@atu.edu or petranelson61@gmail.com. If you'd prefer, you may also contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Christopher E. Trombly at: 479-964-0583 x3205 or ctrombly@atu.edu

I look forward to your participation in this survey. For more information about participation in a research study and about the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people who review the research to protect your rights, please visit Arkansas Tech University's IRB web site at:
https://www.atu.edu/research/human_subject.php

Included on this web site, under the heading "Participant Info", you can access federal regulations and information about the protection of human research participants. If you do not have access to the internet, copies of these federal regulations are available by calling the Arkansas Tech University at 479 968 0319.

1. I have been an administrator for _____ years.
 - ☐ 1 – 5 years
 - ☐ 6 – 10 years
 - ☐ 11 – 15 years
 - ☐ 16 – 20 years
 - ☐ 20 + years
2. I am an administrator for _____.
 - ☐ an Elementary school
 - ☐ a Middle school
 - ☐ a Junior High School
 - ☐ a High School
 - ☐ Other
3. What type of leadership position do you hold?
 - ☐ School principal
 - ☐ Assistant principal
 - ☐ Other
4. If you are the assistant principal are you the special education designee for the building?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
5. I have held my current position for _____ years.
 - ☐ 1 – 5 years
 - ☐ 6 – 10 years
 - ☐ 11 – 15 years
 - ☐ 16 – 20 years
 - ☐ 20 + years
6. What is the number of students that receive special education in your building?
 - ☐ 1 -25
 - ☐ 26 – 50
 - ☐ 51 – 75
 - ☐ 76 – 100
 - ☐ 101 – 125
 - ☐ 126 – 150
 - ☐ 151 – 175

- 176 – 200
- 201 – 225
- 225 – 250
- 250+
- I do not know

7. As a building administrator, how prepared do you feel to provide leaders in the following special education requirement areas?

	Unaware of this requirement	Aware of this requirement but do not understand the specific regulation within this requirement	Understand this requirement and can ensure appropriate implementation of this regulation	Fully understand this requirement and could provide professional development of this regulation
Child Find Requirements	○	○	○	○
Referral Process	○	○	○	○
Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)	○	○	○	○
Re-Evaluation Requirement	○	○	○	○
Individual Education Programs (IEPs)	○	○	○	○
Due Process Procedures	○	○	○	○
Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)	○	○	○	○
Confidentiality	○	○	○	○
Program Standards	○	○	○	○
Extended School Year (ESY)	○	○	○	○
Surrogate Parent Requirements	○	○	○	○
Mediation and Hearings	○	○	○	○
Complaint Procedures	○	○	○	○

Secondary Transition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Private School Placement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Home Schooling	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Please rate your understanding of the following special education timeline requirements.

	Unaware of this timeline requirement	Aware of this requirement but am not sure about specific timeline	Fully understand this timeline requirement
Scheduling a referral meeting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conducting a referral conference decision	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Right to notice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evaluation testing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evaluation programming conference decision meeting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Implementation of the IEP	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
IEP annual review	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Re-evaluation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Manifestation determination meeting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Homebound IEP reviews	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. To what do you attribute your understanding of special education requirements?

10. What would help principals and assistant principals become better prepared to lead special education programs?

