Advocates for the Voiceless

In my sixteen years of service as a principal, I have realized that it is essential that education leaders come to view themselves as active advocates for voiceless students, and for fair educational policies and practices. Specifically, principals should advocate on behalf of two populations: special education students and students in “tracked classes.”

Principal advocacy for these student populations is important because the principal is often the “gatekeeper” in allocation of resources and student class placement decisions. As the school leader, principals have an ethical and professional obligation to make decisions in the best interest of each student—especially those without parent advocates.

Special Education
Principals play a key role in all phases of special education programming, from the student referral process to individualized education program (IEP) implementation. To advocate for these students, principals must first be mindful of the disproportion of racial minorities and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in special education. It is also important to make sure that the response to intervention (RTI) process is followed with solid intervention data that is free of racial or cultural bias.

As special education referrals proceed through the IEP process, principals should assume an advocate role for students who do not have active parent involvement in the process. This can include personally contacting parents or guardians. In my experience, over half of the IEP meetings were attended by neither a parent nor guardian. Other meetings had only marginal parent involvement.

Beyond encouraging parent involvement, a principal’s advocacy role in special education extends to class placement and levels of services provided to students. Principals need to advocate for including students as fully as possible in regular education classrooms. This position may foster resistance from some regular education teachers who view special education students as too disruptive or not capable of handling the academic challenges. However, given appropriate professional development and support, all teachers need to assume responsibility for teaching all students and collaborating with special education and other school staff. In hiring new staff members, principals should determine the candidate’s philosophical position and skill level in working with special education students in regular education classrooms. Furthermore, principals need to consistently articulate this belief and facilitate its implementation.

Regarding levels of service for special education students, a school’s annual special education funding is, in effect, finite. With few exceptions, principals are expected to allocate resources in a manner to nominally implement all student IEPs. Special education students with active advocates often receive a higher level of support services than students without active parent advocates. In these situations, a principal needs to allocate resources in an equitable, ethically defensible manner. For example, principals may need to reconsider optimizing services for a student’s IEP if that service would result in less than minimum required services for other students.

Tracked Classes
Principals also need to critically examine the existence and effect of tracked classes, including accelerated and honors classes. Supporters of a tracked system may contend that students who are academically advanced need to be taught in more challenging classes with their academic peers. Support may also be based on long-standing school traditions or by those who teach higher-level classes and want to teach students perceived to pose few behavior problems and to have solid academic skills. In these situations, a principal needs to ensure that student class placement is based on educationally defensible criteria.

An investigation of the effect of tracked classes should include an analysis of demographic trends, class enrollment procedures, and the impact of the tracked classes on the makeup of other school classes—the “shadow effect” of non-heterogeneous grouping practices.

Placement criteria for tracked classes is a key consideration, especially if higher-level classes are largely populated by white, middle class students. Principals should question the rationale for tracked classes, the quality of instruction offered in all classes, and teacher assignment to the varied tracked classes. For example, schools should avoid placing the least skilled and experienced teachers to the lowest tracked classes.

If a principal believes that the bulk of students are not served well by tracked classes, implementing a de-tracking policy may be his or her next step, though this may be met with significant resistance from the district and some parents and teachers. Movement to a de-tracked school environment will likely consist of a long-term, incremental change process. It will require staff development that provides teachers with skills and resources to teach in academically heterogeneous classrooms. Additionally, parent education efforts need to focus on the strengths of a de-tracked system—greater learning opportunities for all and assurance of high-quality instruction in all
classes that is appropriate and challenging for each student.

To ensure equity while working within a tracked system, a principal could place non-represented students in higher-tracked classes with planned academic support, as needed. Principals should monitor student progress through active involvement with both the classroom teachers and students. In addition to the support that you can provide, seek teacher volunteers for unrepresented students who need support in advanced classes. At the school I led, I implemented a voluntary teacher-student mentorship program that generated significant teacher participation, academic gains for students, and long-term relationships between mentors and mentees.

Empowering Parents
Many parents feel intimidated by formal parent teacher organizations, especially if they belong to the school’s minority racial, ethnic, or socio-economic status group. To foster a stronger voice for traditionally less involved parents at the school I led, I worked with a minority teacher to form a minority parent group. A parent chaired the group, which held monthly meetings. The meetings provided an opportunity for school staff to talk with parents, share concerns, present on school curriculum and procedures, and plan events for the entire school community. Through these meetings, parents gained a more active role in the school and were able to serve as advocates for their children.

Being an advocate for students can be a lonely position. It may create tension between the principal, school staff, parents, and central office staff. Despite the challenges, advocating for students and parents without a voice is ethically and pedagogically sound. And it positively affects the lives of students.

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