

Now is a critical time for principals and special educators to work together to serve the needs of all children.

Judith A. Green

The history of educating children with disabilities is primarily one of separation. For the greater part of the 20th century students with learning, physical, mental, and emotional disabilities, and speech, hearing, vision, orthopedic, and other health impairments often went without educational services. Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act served to dramatically change the policies and procedures governing programs and services for students requiring special education and related services (Bartlett, Etscheidt, & Weisenstein, 2007).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. When reauthorized in 2004 it maintained the IDEA acronym although it is now the Individuals with Disabilities Education *Improvement Act*. The federal government further demonstrated its emphasis on improvement by coordinating IDEA's school efforts with those of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

IDEA and NCLB contribute to the developing environment of uniting general and special education students by emphasizing accountability and improved academic achievement. For example, IDEA permits the use of up to 15 percent of early intervention funding for students who may need supplemen-

tary academic and behavioral support, but who have not been identified as eligible for special education and related services—a population that consistently has been either left out or benefited very little from our system of supplementary support. In keeping with the policy shift aimed at coordinating improvement of



Collaborating With



Special Education Administrators

education for both general and special education students, now is the time for general and special education staff to work together (Robinson & Buly, 2007).

There are three major questions that principals and special education staff should consider as they collaborate to effect education reform for all students:

What must principals keep in mind to work effectively with their special education staff in meeting district, state, and national goals?

Goal relationships. You must be sure that you and your special education staff have a common knowledge of district, state, and national goals, and how they

are interrelated and interconnected.

Communication. This is an ongoing process that is especially critical before collaborative activities. You should review the district's and the school's communication plans with all staff. If a plan does not exist, develop one that establishes guidelines for the levels

and types of communication appropriate for your collaborative endeavor. It should reflect shared decision-making, participation, and responsibility (Caron & McLaughlin, 2002; Cook & Friend, 1991).

Educators must commit to exchanging information with one another and feel safe in sharing assumptions, prior experiences, and fears. Create an environment for collaboration by developing, agreeing to, and posting meeting ground rules that will facilitate open communication. This allows special educators to know your philosophy regarding the provision of educational programs and services to students, and helps them develop a frame of reference for future interactions.

Perception. How principals and special education administrators view one another has a tremendous impact on the success of their collaboration. As Wheatley (2002) writes: "It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about one another that do." Individuals who are willing to suspend preconceived notions about others are more open to the type of sharing and listening that marks effective communication and collaboration.

Capacity building. Certain structures and conditions must be in place to facilitate collaboration and they must remain in place over a period of time. For example, schools that experience unstable leadership have difficulty in maintaining the commitment of human, material, financial, and information resources needed to accomplish collaborative goals.

What are the key challenges that schools face in their reform efforts?

Four Midwestern elementary school principals participating in a study of education reform identified several challenges and frustrations they encountered in implementing the NCLB reform initiatives (Green, 2008).

Assessment. All the principals cited assessment as their greatest challenge. One principal expressed frustration with "trying to bring the special needs children up to the level that they are going to be tested even though their

regular ability level could be two to three years behind."

Adequate yearly progress. Within their discussion of assessment, principals also identified adequate yearly progress as a key challenge. "The results of everything we do are judged on one week's performance and there is no leeway for a lot of the things that happen in a child's life that cause him not to do well at that particular time."

Obtaining teacher support. "Getting teachers on board with the requirements and making them see the positive aspects of it" was a frustrating experience. Teachers tend to enjoy greater job longevity than administrators and often find it difficult to support reform initiatives that they believe they will outlast.

Professional development. Schools depend on professional development to prepare them to accomplish individual and organizational goals, and the enactment of NCLB initiated major curricular changes that required it. The principals found it most frustrating not to have had "training right from the start, right after it [NCLB] was passed. That would have been very helpful."

Social justice. A major challenge associated with current reform efforts are the social justice issues of power and privilege embedded in the daily norms, customs, practices, and ideals of schools.

Overcoming challenges. Principals and special education administrators who embrace federal, state, and local mandates for education reform as opportunities to work together for the good of all children create environments of possibilities. Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) studied schools in New York, England, and Portugal that were providing integrated or inclusion services to special education students. The purpose of the study was to identify leadership practices that increased the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities in a general education setting. Despite the differences among the schools, certain elements held true for all:

- Cultural symbols and language transmitted beliefs and values;
- Staff and children engaged in collaborative practices;

- Educators adamantly believed in the inclusion initiative;
- Educators comprehended the social and political nature of inclusion;
- Staff and students viewed their differences as a resource;
- External forces supported the original impetus for the initiative;
- Leaders engaged in collaborative practices with staff on a regular basis;
- Leaders encouraged and supported their staff in "a collaborative process of school development";
- Leaders regarded students and staff as "full member[s] of the school community"; and
- Organized special education services were an integral part of the school structure.

How can principals and special education administrators collaborate to create individualized education programs (IEPs)?

The principal and the special education administrator have the ability to set the stage for an effective IEP meeting. In the best scenario, the process should begin well in advance of the meeting, preferably at the beginning of the school year, to allow the principal and special education administrator time to collaboratively design a set of coordinated professional development activities for the staff.

The selection of specific agenda topics will be influenced greatly by the context of the local school or district, but there are several basic topics, such as confidentiality procedures, the roles and responsibilities of IEP team members, and general IEP meeting procedures, that general and special education administrators must review annually to ensure compliance and facilitate improved performance.

Ownership and collegiality develop when special and general educators are able to serve as joint presenters and facilitators for appropriate topics, and it is beneficial to inform special education staff on updated policies and procedures that can serve as resources during joint training.

A school or district's climate and

culture, as well as organization, communication, and political, social, and decision-making structures all help to determine the times principals and special education administrators *must* collaborate. The IEP team meeting requirements provide a number of natural opportunities to reinforce some of the elements discussed earlier, such as communication, social justice, encouraging and supporting staff, and organizing special education as an integral part of the school structure.

In their IEP collaboration, principals and special education staff must maintain open, effective, and timely communication to ensure that:

- Personnel time is used efficiently, with educators using IDEA provisions that allow amending of IEPs without convening another meeting, consolidating IEP meetings, and authorizing alternative means of meeting participation;
- Arrangements are made to support appropriate staff in instances where their participation is required at IEP meetings;
- IEPs are accessible to teachers and others responsible for their implementation;
- Room assignments are educationally appropriate for all students and their unique needs;
- Principals are active participants in determining their students' least restrictive environments; and
- All agents of the school district commit to securing and implementing all IEP recommendations for services, equipment, materials, and supplies in a timely manner and in accordance with federal and state requirements.

Collaboration between general and special educators is not a magic bullet to achieve education reform. It does, however, provide both with a mechanism for embracing the opportunities afforded by education reform initiatives to learn and grow together. As one principal noted, "We're all trying to feel our way through and hoping that we are doing what we consider to be best for every child." ■

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WEB RESOURCES

General information about IDEA and implementing its regulations can be found at the IDEA Web site.

<http://idea.ed.gov>

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities provides IDEA training modules on multiple topics.

www.nichcy.org/laws/idea/pages/buildingthelegacy.aspx

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