

What Every Principal Needs to Know About Special Education

This book is different from many that have been developed for principals on the topic of special education. It is different in that it does not solely focus on describing *the law* and special education rules and procedures. Rather, this book is designed as a guidebook to developing strong school leaders who “are strong educators, anchoring their work on central issues of learning and teaching and school improvement” (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium [ISLLC], 1996, p. 5).

A building principal, who is a school leader, is critical to creating effective special education services. In today’s climate of high standards and high stakes accountability, every school principal needs to understand the foundations of effective special education. Principals need to know about special education because they are responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities perform well on assessments. More important, when special education is working, when parents and families feel confident about their child’s education, it is because a strong, supportive, and informed building principal has created a school that values educating every child.

Delegating responsibility for special education to special education teachers was never good leadership. But, until recently it was possible for a principal to leave programmatic decisions to the special educators. Today, no principal can abdicate responsibility for any group of students, including those who receive special education. The expectations for public schools have never been higher than they are today, and at no time have schools been under such close public scrutiny. Schools exist in a rapidly changing policy and funding environment that demands new skills and knowledge from principals. The case of Mr. Baker illustrates this point.

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Mr. Baker has been a principal for 8 years, first as an elementary school principal and for the past 3 years within a middle school of 850 students. Mr. Baker is proud of his school and his students and staff. Of his 850 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, 47% receive free and reduced meals. He has more students who qualify, but the families just don't apply. Also, 12% of his students have individualized education plans (IEPs). Since he came to this middle school, the test scores in reading and writing and math have increased by about 20-50%. This comes after several years of flat or declining scores. Faculty turnover has decreased. Last year, he had to replace only five teachers, and the school staff is, in Mr. Baker's opinion, really starting to work together as a team.

But, this past school year something happened to change Mr. Baker's opinion of his school. Last fall, Mr. Baker received the disaggregated test scores and attendance rates for specific groups of students, including those with disabilities. While Mr. Baker was aware of how his low-income students had been progressing and how African American and Hispanic students were doing as a group, he had never looked at his students with disabilities. His assistant principal, Ms. Gregor, and his lead special education teacher, Mr. Rich, were responsible for these students. The school hadn't had any problems with parents; no formal complaints had been filed. Mr. Baker thought things were OK.

Mr. Baker is about to find out that there are a number of things he now needs to know, starting with just who the students with disabilities in his school are and what he is expected to accomplish with them. Mr. Baker, like many of his peers, has entered a new era in public education. He is now expected to be a school leader for *all* students and programs and to be accountable for improving achievement of *all* students in his school. These responsibilities require Mr. Baker and his peers to gain new knowledge about special education: both new legal requirements as well as new ideas about what special education should look like in a school. The new knowledge includes having an understanding of how to reduce unnecessary referrals and identification, how to provide access to the general education curriculum, and how to create a collaborative culture between general and special educators and a whole school commitment to the achievement of every student. It will require Mr. Baker to also understand and interpret the data pertaining to students with disabilities and to act on those data.

In summary, it will require understanding the concepts presented in this book.

This book provides basic foundational knowledge of special education that every principal needs in order to lead effectively. Section I provides an overview of critical elements of the special education policy framework. Section II presents the foundations of a quality special education program and Section III gives you practical guidance in how to create effective special education. Section IV summarizes the information and skills you will need to help you develop a clear vision for your own school.

FIVE THINGS EVERY PRINCIPAL NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION

Principals who are effective leaders of special education need to understand five key principles.

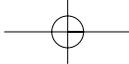
1. Principals must understand the core special education legal foundations or *entitlements*. They should understand the underlying intent or rationale behind specific procedures. Following rules that have little meaning leads to cookie-cutter programs and pro forma compliance and not to effective special education. Principals who understand the legal foundations of special education are able to make the critical distinction between a student with a disability who is eligible to receive special education and one who is not.

2. Principals need to understand that effective special education matches instruction to the learning characteristics of students with disabilities. Neither disability labels nor categories provide the information necessary to create that match.

3. Principals must understand that special education is not a *place* nor a *program*. At the level of the school, special education is a set of services and supports that is provided to individual students to give them access to curriculum and to ensure that they continually learn and progress in that curriculum.

4. Principals must know how to meaningfully include students with disabilities in assessments and new accountability systems.

5. Principals need to know how to create the schoolwide conditions that support effective special education. Special education does not exist in a vacuum within a school. It has never been more important for principals to integrate special education into all aspects of the school and to ensure that efforts to improve schools fully include special education.



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In the following sections, we expand on these key ideas. We provide specific knowledge and practical strategies, as well as examples for how to create effective special education. We hope you enjoy this book—we enjoyed writing it. We also hope you find it useful. We have spent countless hours in schools observing and working with special and general education teachers and we have been amazed by the knowledge and commitment of individual principals. Good special education exists in schools with caring, knowledgeable, and strong school leaders. Countless interviews with parents and teachers have shown us how a principal has made a difference to their school or with their child. Because of the difference you can make for children with disabilities, we hope that you find the ideas and resources in this book valuable.

