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Promoting the Success of All Students:

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Introduction

In today’s schools, building level administrators are faced with numerous challenges as they attempt to provide leadership that promotes successful learning experiences for all students. Setting the stage for this leadership, the Council of Chief State School Officers organized the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) in 1996. This consortium was formed for the purpose of developing model standards and assessments for school leaders. The ISLLC’s primary constituency is the state education agencies responsible for the administration of licensure. It included representatives of state agencies/departments of education and professional standards boards, with considerable participation by professional associates.

In addition to raising quality within the profession, it was the hope of the Consortium that the development of model standards would promote action on two fronts. First, ISLLC member states believed that the standards would provide useful information for decision making within each state on a wide array of topics, such as program development and review, licensure, and advanced certification. Second, Consortium members expected that the creation of common standards would promote collaboration among the states, either collectively or in smaller groupings, on topics of mutual interest, such as reciprocity of licensure and candidate assessment (Council of Chief State School Officers 1996).

The six standards designed by the Consortium strive to highlight what is essential about the role of school leadership. Focusing on student success, aspects of the standards include the development and communication of a vision of learning, developing and sustaining an inclusive culture of learning, managing the learning environment, collaborating with families and community, the integrity and ethics of decision making in the school and community, and finally, the socio-political aspect of schooling.

A key to the standards is that each begins with the same phrase, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students.” Promoting the success of all students is also the challenge set forth by the implementation of current federal and state mandates. Under the federal No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandates call for the inclusion of all students in the assessment and accountability systems (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). Provisions in the legislation mandate that all students have access to the general education curriculum and be included in state-mandated testing. Answering the call of the current legislation and the goal for all students to experience success, building level principals must have fundamental knowledge of special education programs and services. However, research indicates that principal preparation course work may not target special education leadership responsibilities (DiPaolo and Tschanned-Moran 2003).

Further studies also highlight the intersection of leadership and the area of special education. Doyle and Rice (2002) suggested that principals, in regard to administering special education programs and services, felt unsupported and challenged by bureaucratic structures. Lasky and Karge (2006)
examined principal preparation programs and found the need for increased training of principals in the area of special education during the preservice phase. In similar findings, Hess and Kelly (2007) raised questions about whether graduates of principal preparation programs were being equipped for the challenges and opportunities posed by an era of accountability.

In additional studies, Irons and Broyles (2006) examined current principals' perceptions of their level of competence and responsibility with respect to the implementation of special education programs on their campus. In general, principals perceived themselves as having a high level of competence regarding special education issues. The one concern principals did state, as reported by the authors, was a lack of training in the area of special education mandates. Using survey research with secondary principals, Wakeman, Browder, and Flowers (2006), found that principals overall reported being well informed in fundamental issues regarding the area of special education, although current issues such as self-determination practices and transitional services, functional behavioral assessments, and universally designed lessons were perceived as a limitation.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of practicing principals in the Southeast Missouri region regarding their level of knowledge of special education. As instructors in the college of education, it was the goal of the researchers to use the data gathered to inform their classroom practices, especially in the area of principal preparation. The focus of this paper is to report the quantitative research findings obtained through survey research. Three questions guided the research: (a) What is the level of understanding that building level principals have regarding issues surrounding the area of special education? (b) What is the relationship between building level principals understanding to school and district student population, training and experience, grade level of the building assigned, and institution where administrative degree was obtained? (c) What are perceived strengths and concerns of principals regarding special education issues?

Participants

The participants were current building level principals in the Region 1 service area of the Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC) in Missouri. This region encompasses the area of southeast Missouri and is the main area of service for Southeast Missouri State University. Ninety-seven school districts are included in this Region 1 area.

Design and Instrumentation

The design of the study was survey methodology. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to summarize the findings. An electronic survey was created from the conceptual framework and was used to obtain responses from principals regarding the perception of their knowledge of current special education issues.

The web based survey instrument was designed using statements that centered on the roles and responsibilities of the building level principal. A self-rating format required respondents to consider three choices concerning their perceptions. These choices included Extremely Knowledgeable, Knowledgeable, and Less than Knowledgeable. The web site included instructions for completing the survey as well as fields for demographic information. The survey included 17 questions with a pull-down
menu of the three choices. In addition, a text box was available for respondents to add additional information if desired. The survey was designed to take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Face validity of the instrument was established from a group of knowledgeable experts in the field of educational leadership and special education. To address reliability, the survey was piloted in the university area by assistant principals who where not participants in the study. The survey was also analyzed for clarity by both researchers. As a result, the wording of two questions was revised. No items were eliminated from the original survey.

Procedure

The survey instructions were distributed by email to all building level principals in the Region 1 area. Emails were secured from the state listing on the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website. A cover letter, with instructions, was sent to principals. Principals were given 30 days in which to respond. A follow-up reminder notice was sent after two weeks from the initial mailing.

Results and Discussion

Two hundred eighty-five surveys were distributed to area principals. Of those surveys, 116 were returned, resulting in a 40% return rate. The following frequency tables display the characteristics of the individuals completing the survey. These characteristics were used to disaggregate the respondents’ ratings into subgroups for analysis.

Table 1.
Frequency distribution of respondents by building student population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student population</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 501</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.
Frequency distribution of respondents by district student population.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student population</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>&lt; 2000</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; 2000</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequency distribution of respondents by school size suggests that the majority, 69% of respondents, were assigned to buildings with small student populations. Additional, 64% of respondents worked as principals in districts with less than 2000 students.

Table 3.

Frequency distribution of respondents by years of experience as a principal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years experience</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; 5</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequency distribution of respondents by years of experience suggests that the respondents had significant experience as building level principals. Approximately 83% of respondents had greater than five years experience. The mean for the respondents was 15.5 years of experience.

Table 4.

Frequency distribution of respondents by grade level of building assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Assignment</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>Elem.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of respondents were assigned as principals in elementary settings. Elementary buildings typically serve students in Kindergarten through grade six.

Table 5.

Frequency distribution of respondents by institution where administrative degree was granted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>SEMO</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SEMO = Southeast Missouri State University, Other = Arkansas State University, Governors State University, Lincoln University, Lindenwood, Maryville University, Missouri State University, Northern Michigan University, Saint Louis University Southwest Baptist University, University of Central Missouri, University of Missouri Columbia, University of Missouri St Louis, Western Kentucky University, William Woods University

The majority of respondents to the survey, 60 %, earned their administrative degree at institutions other than Southeast Missouri State University. Other than Northern Michigan University, the 14 institutions represented in this group are all from surrounding Regional Professional Development Center Regions or states.

An ANOVA was conducted using the subgroups of school and district student population, training and experience, grade level of the building assigned, and institution where administrative degree was
granted for each question. This analysis suggested there was no significant difference in level of understanding that building level principals reported regarding issues surrounding the area of special education. Even though there was no difference between the way the subgroups responded to the questions a common pattern emerged across all subgroups regarding strengths and concerns. All subgroups reported they felt their strengths included: procedural safeguard issues (discipline and compliance requirements) and facilitating collaboration between general education and special education faculty. The subgroups also reported common concerns. First, the respondents reported concerns regarding the need for more technical knowledge regarding the testing procedures for determining eligibility for students served in special programs. A second concern reported by the principals, highlighted knowledge and understanding regarding the collection of data used to monitor and fund special education.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the perception of practicing principals in the Southeast Missouri region regarding their level of knowledge of special education. It was the goal of the researchers to use this information to inform their practice, especially in the area of principal preparation. Overall, the respondents reported they perceived themselves to be knowledgeable of current special education issues. Areas of strength, as reported, included the understanding of procedural safeguards, with an emphasis on discipline. The specific areas involving the discipline of students served in special education related to short term and long term removal of students from the educational setting. Another area of strength, as reported by practicing principals, was related to collaboration. Principals reported they were knowledgeable of their role in facilitating collaboration between general education and special education teachers.

Common concerns of practicing principals were also reported. Areas principals felt less knowledgeable involved the understanding of testing and evaluation procedures used to determine eligibility for special education students. In addition, the ideas surrounding the differences between students served under IDEA and those eligible for services under Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act were noted. Finally, principals reported a concern in the area of data collection and funding sources used to determine special education appropriations for their district and campus.

As an addition to the survey questions, respondents were given the opportunity to respond by adding any additional information as suggestions for improving the leadership preparation program. With the mean experience of principals who participated in the study totaling 15.5 years, many reported learning on the job. Learning occurred by attending meetings where Individualized Education Plans (IEP) were discussed and developed. In addition, by collaborating with their district special educations directors, several principals reported this aided in their understanding of special education programs. Suggestions also included embedding activities relating to special education within the Internship requirements as well as providing a specific course with a focus on how to implement current special education laws and regulations on their campus.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study include those surrounding survey research. Respondents self-rated their knowledge of special education issues. These perceptions may not represent the actual reality of individual situations and level of understanding regarding the area of special education issues. Survey
research typically has a low response rate. Principals who chose to respond may have specific interests or professional credentials that include the area of special education and may view special education in a more positive light. Conversely, principals that responded may have a negative bias toward special education issues due to their own experiences and training. This study was limited to those practicing principals in southeast Missouri.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Given the results of the survey, the following recommendations are offered.

1. Principal preparation programs may need to revise current curricular, instructional and assessment requirements to include information specifically regarding the area of special education. A specific class that involves the administration and supervision of special education could provide training and support at the preservice level. In addition, activities could be embedded within the practicum or internship experience, such as attending and/or leading student IEP meetings, shadowing the district special education director, completing a performance-based evaluation with a special education teacher, or being involved in the data collection and child count at the district and campus level.

2. As educators begin their careers as administrators at the campus level, experienced principals in the field, with on-the-job training, should be assigned as mentors to assist novice principals in their learning and decision-making regarding special education issues. First and second year principals are consumed with new learning experiences. With a mentor offering support, everyday challenges of providing a quality special education program could be reduced or alleviated at the campus level.

3. Principals may benefit from continued professional training and opportunities to gain technical knowledge in the area of special education. With the reauthorization of the IDEA law in 2004 and the requirements for the inclusion of special education students in the assessment and accountability systems as required by NCLB, principals are continually faced with the challenge to stay current in their knowledge of federal and state mandates. University courses at the specialist or doctoral level could incorporate these updated mandates into the curriculum. In addition, state agencies could sponsor workshops and seminars regarding new state regulations and requirements.

4. As a recommendation for further study, several principals addressed the need to promote the idea that a student receiving special education should be taught as much as possible in the general education setting. Questions regarding how a principal promotes the success of all students by building an inclusionary culture of high expectations could be addressed.

Summary

Principals are faced with the challenge to provide a successful educational experience for students that attend their schools. Formal training, as well as on-the-job learning, are ways in which principals gain knowledge of their role in providing quality special education programs and services. By understanding the area of special education, especially in this era of accountability and assessment, principals can be prepared to develop, communicate, and monitor a vision of learning that includes all students.

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References


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