

THE CASE OF THE INEFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATOR: INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES OF A FIRST YEAR PRINCIPAL*

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Abstract

This case was developed to use in leadership courses with specific implications for school law and supervision of instruction. Varied data are presented about the school and district for students to analyze. School instructional policies of inclusion of special needs students and supervision of teachers play a role in the course of events at Washington Elementary School. Dr. Long, a first year principal faces the challenge of addressing the issue of a special education teacher who does not perform responsibilities, and there are direct implications for district personnel procedures regarding providing teachers with assistance.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

1 Background and Demographics

Washington Elementary School is located in Andersonville, Mississippi. Andersonville is a very rural area with a population of about 5,000; it is the seat of the district. Washington Elementary is the largest of five elementary schools. Andersonville School District also has five middle schools and one high school.

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The enrollment of Washington is six hundred students who are taught by twenty-five teachers, two special education teachers, and fifteen paraprofessionals. Washington has an eighty percent free and reduced lunch population with a racial composition of seventy-five percent African-American, twenty percent White, and five percent Hispanic.

The Washington Elementary principal, Dr. Long, is an African American female. Dr. Long was appointed in the summer prior to the 2007 -08 school year. Serving as an assistant principal in another district, Dr. Long's educational experiences include teaching at the college and high school levels. Dr. Long, a native of the district, attended Washington Elementary as a student and graduated from Andersonville High School. Dr. Long describes her administrative style as authoritarian yet democratic, and she is student-centered.

Instructional Challenges with a Look at the Inclusion Model

Among the many adjustments for the school year, the staff of Washington implemented a reading program and adopted an inclusion model for its special education program. The implemented research-based reading program, Success For All (SFA), was developed by Robert Slavin, then at John Hopkins University and his colleagues. The program was implemented at Washington for two primary reasons: (a) the research findings indicated increased student achievement levels of students in schools with SFA, and (b) the program was also designed to meet the needs of minority and at risk students (Campolio, 2000).

Washington's instructional challenge regarding special needs students was mandated from the State of Mississippi, which developed after the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Essex, 2006.) With the exception of a few special needs students, the state mandated that special education students be educated in the regular education classroom. Prior to the State's mandate, special education students received instruction in self-contained classrooms with all special education students in the same classroom. There were severe cases where students were functioning on first grade academic levels, and the mandate required that they be placed in fourth grade classrooms that were closer to the age appropriate levels of the students. As a result of the mandate, two classrooms at each grade level would have special education students integrated into regular education classrooms.

In the inclusion classroom at Washington, the regular education teacher provides the direct instruction. One inclusion teacher and a paraprofessional are responsible for two grade levels. The inclusion teacher rotates among four classes spending approximately two hours in each inclusion classroom. The inclusion teacher's main concerns are the progress of special needs students and making certain that special needs students receive necessary accommodations; however, the inclusion teacher may provide one-on-one assistance to any student.

Andersonville School District required special education teachers to maintain the Individualized Educational Plans (IEPS) of special education students, inform the regular education teachers of modifications, and provide instructional assistance to students in the regular education classroom. Special and regular education teachers are required to collaborate. A paraprofessional also provides assistance to students in the inclusion classrooms. Student success is monitored through progress monitoring on a weekly basis as linked to classroom assessments; formal monitoring occurs at the end of the IEP term to determine if students have met goals. Due to the lack of funding, a paraprofessional was also shared among four classes to provide tutorial assistance to students. The inclusion schedule implemented at Washington requires the paraprofessional to give assistance to special needs students at a different time from the inclusion teacher allowing for additional time with two adults in the inclusion class.

The two neighboring districts have an inclusion plan that allows for one regular education teacher, one special education teacher, and one paraprofessional in a class with approximately seventeen regular education students and a maximum number of five special needs students. In both of the neighboring districts, the special education department experiences better standardized test scores of students. The regular and special education teachers collaborate on lesson planning and engage in team teaching. The paraprofessional's role is to provide tutorial assistance as needed. At Washington Elementary, the inclusion classrooms contain a maximum of twenty-one students with approximately five special needs students.

2 The Appointment of Special Education Teacher – Ms Jackson

Dr. Long needed a special education in order to begin the school year fully staffed with only three days remaining until the start of school. Dr. Long accepted the recommendation of the personnel director to hire Ms Jackson, a certified regular and special education teacher with twenty-five years of experience that included a variety of teaching assignments in six other elementary and middle schools in the district. In preparation for the new assignment, Dr. Long assigned Ms. Jackson to attend a six-day special education training that addressed IEP preparation, modifications for special needs students, and provisions of classroom assistance to special needs students.

Dr. Long assigned Ms. Jackson to manage the IEPS and provide classroom assistance to the first and second grade students. Dr. Long assigned Ms. Jackson to the younger students because most of her experiences were in kindergarten. After doing research, Dr. Long also discovered that Ms. Jackson had satisfactory evaluations; however, most of the previous principals that she worked with viewed her as a lazy teacher - one that does the minimum and is unmotivated. Mr. Davis, the most recent principal with whom Ms. Jackson worked stated that Ms. Jackson "makes up excuses when she does something wrong." Ms. Lee was the other special education teacher, and she was responsible for third and fourth grade special needs students.

School started on August 17, 2007. At the end of September, Dr. Long received correspondence from central office regarding twenty IEPS that needed to be updated immediately. The correspondence from central office indicated that only one, third grade IEP was late – the others were of first and second grade students. Dr. Long had also received concerns from first and second grade teachers regarding the absence of instructional assistance and the absence of modifications for special education students. Ms. Jackson was not providing instructional assistance in classrooms; she did not follow her daily scheduled visits to classrooms, and she was not maintaining.

Dr. Long scheduled a conference with both special education and regular education teachers. Dr. Long discussed the immediate attention necessary to complete the IEPS requested by central office, the need for regular education teachers to have modifications in their instructional delivery, and the need for special education teachers to provide classroom assistance. Ms. Lee volunteered to assist Ms. Jackson in updating the necessary IEPS. Ms. Lee confirmed through a phone call to the director of special education at central office that the one, third grade IEP was complete. Both special education teachers and regular education teachers with special needs students received a schedule that included times to devote to preparing IEPS and times for providing classroom assistance. Dr. Long explained to both special education teachers that providing classroom assistance to students was critical because of the new state mandate; some students were in age-appropriate classes but were functioning at lower academic levels.

Approximately a week later, first and second grade teachers began expressing to Dr. Long that Ms. Jackson was still not providing classroom assistance to special education students. Dr. Long began following the schedule of Ms. Jackson and discovered that Ms. Jackson was not in her assigned classrooms. Dr. Long phoned the special education director who was assigned to Washington Elementary, Ms. Oncale. Dr. Long informed Ms. Oncale of the present concerns as well as the previous conference that was held with Ms. Jackson. In the previous conference, Dr. Long attempted to outline the responsibilities of the special education teachers. Ms. Oncale requested that another conference was necessary with Ms. Jackson, and Ms. Oncale deemed it necessary to attend. Dr. Long also phoned the personnel director, who suggested that Ms. Jackson be placed on Level I assistance.

3 The District's Policy

Andersonville's policy required that teachers be placed on levels of assistance prior to any other actions transpiring. The three levels of assistance are intensive and proactive measures that serve as documentation that efforts were made by administration to provide assistance to teachers in critical need of improvement. Principals are responsible for bi-annual observations of all teachers at their respective schools to determine the quality of teacher performance regarding instructional and non-instructional duties. Teachers placed

on Level I assistance are given a list of recommendations to assist in areas needing improvement and have four weeks to demonstrate growth. Teachers that do not demonstrate improvement move to Level II, then Level III. In Level II, teachers are given more intense instructions with four weeks to demonstrate growth. If it is determined that a teacher has not performed satisfactorily at the end of the four week period in Level II, a teacher moves to Level III. A teacher that is placed on Level III assistance and completes Level III with an unsatisfactory rating can be recommended for dismissal. A conference is held at each level, and documentation of the conference is necessary with signatures of everyone in attendance. Principals are instructed to phone the central office supervisor assigned to the school to assist teachers who are placed on assistance.

The type of assistance that teachers receive depends upon the areas where teachers are lacking in performance. The general areas for assistance are instructional duties, non-instructional duties, and professionalism (e.g. parent relationships, dress code). Teachers with instructional problems work with a supervisor in lesson planning, developing lesson objectives, and implementing lessons. In the first week of assistance, teachers are required to observe two peers and reflect on the experience in writing prior to being observed by the supervisor. In the second and third weeks of assistance, the teacher is observed three times weekly. The supervisor gives additional recommendations after the first week of observations, and improvement is expected after the third week. In the fourth week, the supervisor reflects on the improvement of the teacher; recommendations are made to the principal by the supervisor.

Level I Conference

Ms. Oncale, Dr. Long, and Ms. Jackson were in attendance at the conference. Dr. Long began the conference by explaining the purpose and listing the concerns regarding Ms. Jackson's performance. Ms. Jackson admitted that she was not following her schedule and completing the IEPS. Ms. Jackson indicated that she had several personal problems that obviously interfered with her work. Ms. Jackson was given a list of recommendations to assist her in performing her responsibilities, and she signed the documentation of the Level I assistance period. Dr. Long forwarded a copy to the personnel director and kept a copy of file at Washington.

Ms. Jackson began completing IEPS; however, she was not providing classroom assistance to students. Ms. Oncale gave Ms. Jackson a list of strategies that could be utilized in working with students and a daily planner to assist her in following her schedule. Ms. Oncale required Ms. Jackson to spend two days observing/shadowing a special needs teacher at another school with a schedule similar to her schedule. Ms. Jackson was required to write a reflection on the experience, and Ms. Jackson exhibited satisfactory performance during the shadowing period.

Ms Jackson's Performance after the Shadowing Period

After Ms. Jackson returned from observing/shadowing, Ms. Oncale began observing Ms. Jackson to give additional assistance. Ms. Jackson was not reporting to classes nor did she provide teachers with modifications for special needs students. Attempting to motivate Ms. Jackson to follow her schedule, Ms. Oncale conferenced with Ms. Jackson. After four weeks of assistance, Ms. Oncale recommended that Dr. Long place Ms. Jackson on Level II, then Level III assistance after four additional weeks. Dr. Long kept documentation of all incidents and conferences. Ms. Jackson was placed on Level II, then Level III assistance. As previously cited, Andersonville's board policy indicates that a teacher may be recommended for dismissal hearings when a teacher does not receive a satisfactory rating at the completion of Level III.

Ms. Jackson phoned Washington Elementary the morning following the Level III conference. She asked the secretary to make the principal aware that she was ill and to inform the principal that she would be requesting sick leave for the remainder of the school year.

The school board granted Ms. Jackson the leave, and the personnel director informed Dr. Long that no additional action could be taken regarding Ms. Jackson's performance because she did not complete the Level III assistance period. Ms. Jackson was a tenured teacher with accumulated sick leave. In addition, Ms. Jackson would remain an employee of Washington district for the next academic year. Dr. Long could request that Ms. Jackson be transferred; however, there was no guarantee that a position would be available in another school in the district.

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Teaching Notes

This case was developed to use in leadership courses with specific implications for school law and supervision of instruction. Varied data are presented about the school and district for students to analyze. School instructional policies of inclusion of special needs students and supervision of teachers play a role in the course of events at Washington Elementary School. A first-year principal faces the challenge of addressing the issue of a special education teacher that is not performing responsibilities, and there are direct implications for district personnel procedures regarding providing teachers with assistance.

Key Areas for Reflection

1. Inclusion as an educational practice and philosophy
2. Tenure and the legal implications
3. District training issues and professional development

Key Issues/Questions

1. What should principals know about district special education policies as they relate to supervising teachers? Remediating teachers?
2. What legal aspects of special education complicate the supervision and evaluation of teachers?
3. Did the principal attempt to carry out the district policy in an attempt to assist/evaluate Ms. Jackson? Are there other possible factors that the principal ignored? Should the principal have placed Ms Jackson on Level I assistance in conference one?
4. Examine the role of the principal and central office director across Level I through Level III.
5. Identify the ethical and legal dilemmas the principal faces.
6. What is the central office administrator's role in providing assistance to the principal in evaluating the teacher?
7. Is there evidence indicating a possible ethical issue (on the part of central office) with the assignment of Ms Jackson to Washington Elementary with a first-year principal?
8. Washington's inclusion model and the models of the neighboring districts are discussed. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the models? What constitutes an ideal inclusion model?

3.1 Suggested Readings

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Additional Readings

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