Preparing Administrative Leaders to Support Special Education Programs in Schools: A Comprehensive Multi-dimensional Model

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.

Timothy Gilson  
*University of Northern Iowa*

Susan Etscheidt  
*University of Northern Iowa*

Professional standards for principals include numerous provisions addressing the need to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to promote effective special education programs. The administration of special education programs requires complex responsibilities including assurances that policies and practices are in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Administrators report that oversight of special education programs is among their most prioritized responsibilities yet was the area for which they were least prepared. This paper discusses coursework linked to professional standards and special education content, selected student assessment products, and qualitative data from program graduates. Several implications are identified.

Editor’s Note: Occasionally, we publish articles in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation that are not reports of empirical research but rather offer some other benefit to the field. This is one such article. The authors’ description of a leadership preparation program model that emphasizes enhanced preparation for leadership in the area of special education was deemed of value to share with the field and we are pleased to include it in this issue.
Principals are to be involved in all aspects of the school environment, including the administration of special education programs. Clearly, the professional standards for educational leaders include numerous provisions addressing the need for administrators to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to promote effective special education programs within their schools. Attention to the achievement of students of color, students from low-income families, students with special educational needs, and English learners has brought focus to learning gaps among students. As the recent Wallace Foundation’s (2021) report reminds us, “this attention has heightened the focus in school leadership on equity and cultural responsiveness, reflected in the prominence of these topics in the recently adopted Professional Standards for Educational Leaders” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 2). These recently developed Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) require administrators to (a) place children at the center of education and accept responsibility for each student’s academic success and well-being (Standard 2 Ethical and Professional Norms); (b) ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success (Standard 3 Equity and Cultural Responsiveness); (c) confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status (Standard 3 Equity and Cultural Responsiveness); and (d) know, comply with, and help the school community understand local, state, and federal laws, rights, policies, and regulations so as to promote student success (Standard 9 Operations and Management) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). It should also be noted here that while the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards (NPBEA, 2018) are often used by institutions of higher education undergoing accreditation, this study is more suited to a PSEL alignment as we discuss readiness levels of practicing administrators; for which PSEL standards are more commonly utilized. These standards provide a focus on equity and should guide school administrators in the oversight of special education programs in their schools. Yet the successful administration of special education programs requires multiple, complex responsibilities.

Special Education Administrative Responsibilities

As the representative of the local education agency (LEA), building leaders must assure that policies and practices are in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as federal and state regulations. Many district-level leaders also share these responsibilities. These legal provisions include identifying those students who have a disability and need special education [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(3)] through an eligibility process aligned with IDEA evaluation requirements [20 U.S.C. § 1414 (a-c)]. Once identified, LEA leaders must provide a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(1)], which requires assurances that students with disabilities receive educational benefit from their educational programs. The child’s educational program is memorialized in an Individual Education Program (IEP) [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)] which must be developed by a properly constituted IEP team [20 U.S.C. § 14(d)(1)(B)] and implemented by highly qualified teachers [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(14)(C)]. The child’s IEP must be delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE) [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5)] with preference in general education rather than separate classes or programs. As a required IEP team member, the building administrator must be qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities, knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, and knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the local educational agency [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(B)(iv)]. The administrator must guarantee that parents and children are afforded numerous procedural safeguards [20 U.S.C. § 1415(b)]. The administrator must
know the disciplinary provisions, which involve limits on the number of days an eligible child may be suspended or expelled and requirements for conducting a manifestation determination [20 U.S.C. § 1415(k)]. The LEA must assure that building policies, procedures and programs are consistent with state policies addressing funding, service provision, and personnel [20 U.S.C. § 1413(a)].

Administrators must collect and report data for required State Performance Plans (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR) for indicators including graduation rates, dropout rates, student participation and performance on statewide assessments data, suspension and expulsion data, LRE data, identification data including possible disproportionality statistics, parental involvement data, child find data, transition data, and dispute resolution data [20 U.S.C. § 1415(b)]. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) uses the information from the SPP/APR to annually determine if the state meets the requirements and purposes of the IDEA.

In addition to the administrator’s required duties, research suggests that administrative support is important in cultivating effective special educators and establishing effective problem-solving teams (Fowler et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2017). Principals must provide teachers with access to professional development and resources to address the needs of students with disabilities (Stelitano et al., 2019), including behavior and discipline issues (McIntosh et al., 2014). Strong administrative support is critical to successful inclusive practices (Melloy et al., 2021; Shogren et al., 2015) and to assure high-quality access to general education contexts for students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2019). The administrative climate of the school cultivates culturally responsive practices and policies that address the needs of all students (Barakat et al., 2019; Minkos et al., 2017). Principals spend considerable time addressing special education issues, and must adopt several key roles such as visionaries, partners, coaches, conflict resolvers, and advocates to deliver effective programs (Cobb, 2015).

The Problem: Perceived Lack of Preparedness

Given the complexities of successfully administering special education programs, administrative preparation programs must provide prospective educational leaders with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to effectively support those programs. Yet, the large majority of current administrators report a lack of preparedness to meet their duties and responsibilities for special education. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2021) highlighted the important role of principals in promoting inclusive and effective special education services and noted that most school leaders have limited experiences with teachers and students with disabilities as part of their administrative preparation programs. The report cited a Rand survey of more than 3,500 principals which found that only 12 percent felt adequately prepared to support the needs of students with disabilities. Only eight states require principals to receive specific special education training in preparation programs, with most of the coursework focused on legal requirements (Billingsley et al., 2017), leaving principals ill-prepared “to address the needs of students with disabilities and others who struggle in school” (p. 7).

Administrators report that oversight of special education programs is among their most prioritized responsibilities, yet was the area for which they were least prepared (Petzko, 2008). Some administrators report “no special education training in their principal preparation programs” (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 104) and others exited their preparation programs “unprepared or only somewhat prepared to facilitate inclusive schedules, collect data for special education, oversee curriculum and alternative assessments for students with disabilities, participate with parents in IEP meetings, and address behavioral issues” (Schaaf et al., 2015, p. 178). Few school leaders are prepared to provide effective leadership for their special education programs, and most were not provided sufficient knowledge and field experiences in special education (Sun & Xin, 2019). According to a review by Anderson et al. (2018), institutions affiliated with the University Council of Educational Administration included four general content areas in the curricula
for administrator preparation which include (a) instructional leadership; (b) school improvement; (c) family and community relations; and (d) management - none of which included specific content related to special education. The competencies required for the administration of special education programs have been a long-neglected area within university-based administrator preparation programs (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Research has confirmed the lack of explicit attention to instruction regarding special education in administrator preparation programs (Melloy, 2018; Melloy et al., 2021; Schaaf et al., 2015). McHatton et al. (2010) found a “dissonance between what educational leadership preparation programs are providing future school administrators and their on-the-job demands” (p. 13). Zarelsky and colleagues (2008) similarly found preservice preparation inadequate and proposed that “critical issues and dilemmas of practice in special education be explicitly integrated into the curricular design of leadership preparation programs” (p. 173) through case studies and problem-based learning approaches, with rich opportunities for personal and professional reflection. Failure to provide adequate preparation during preservice education leaves administrators to rely on “on-the-job” training and in-service professional development, with costly consequences for school districts.

Litigation

Principals hold the key to school level compliance with special education law and policies (Lashley, 2007). Indeed, “special education may be the most litigated educational law issue school leaders face” (Strader, 2007, p. 178). Administrators unprepared to comply with their special education legal responsibilities face significant liability when confronted with lawsuits resulting in substantial costs to their school districts (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Zirkel & Machin, 2012). School administrators are often uninformed or misinformed about special education law issues (Militello et al., 2009) and cannot guide their teachers in implementing legal requirements. Educational administration research and the high levels of litigation are indicative of the need to improve university-based administrator preparation programs.

Purpose and Conceptual Framework

Given the importance of the successful administration of special education programs in PK-12 schools and the perceived lack of adequate preparation by school leaders, the purpose of this article was to present a comprehensive, multi-dimensional administrator preparation program designed with targeted and integrated special education leadership skills and competencies. The program of study should contain the key elements of effective, innovative educational leadership programs (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), including standards-based curriculum, field-based internships, and active instructional approaches to link theory to practice. Importantly, to ensure that prospective administrators are prepared to provide effective leadership for their special education programs, the program must purposefully integrate additional elements addressing diversity and disability.

Instructional Content

The content of the preparation program must include a deep understanding of disability, special education law and policy, current trends and research-based special education practices (Crockett, 2019; Bateman & Bateman, 2014). The content should be multidisciplinary (Pazey et al., 2012) and delivered by university faculty and practitioners with expertise and experience in special education. The content must be aligned with both NELP and PSEL standards for building-level administrators (NPBEA, 2018; NPBEA, 2015), and standards developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) for special education
administrators (CEC, 2009) for an integrated framework of inclusive social justice leadership (Pazey et al., 2012).

Field-based Practica & Internships

The preparation program must also include the opportunity to apply course content in field-based practica or internships under the skilled supervision of mentors familiar with special education responsibilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The strong partnerships and collaboration between local school districts and the university-based program will provide authentic, meaningful, and practical experiences. Internship experiences must include specific experiences and exploration of diversity issues (Figueiredo-Brown et al., 2015) so that prospective principals are prepared to lead inclusive school communities.

Student Learning Outcomes and External Validation

The comprehensive preparation program should also clearly identify student learning outcomes and plans to assess those outcomes, using both direct and indirect metrics (Melloy, 2018). Student reflection of practica/internship experiences would arguably be one of the most important metrics. The content of the preparation program should be regularly validated by both external reviewers and by program advisory boards or councils. Advisory boards should guide curriculum development, ensure curriculum relevance, and assure meaningful involvement of the larger educational community in program delivery and support (Mello, 2019).

Importantly, specific competencies aligned with special education leadership must be integrated and infused throughout the entire preparation program. Rather than a single course addressing diversity and disability, the program of study must purposefully include content addressing diversity and disability in all aspects of the preparation requirements.

A Comprehensive, Multi-Dimensional Administrator Preparation Model

We present the Educational Leadership Preparation Program at the University of A, which addresses the various dimensions described above. A description of the preparation program with the required coursework and practica is provided in Appendix A. We provide specific examples of the content linked to professional standards, and the course and practica/internships requirements with emphasis on those explicitly addressing special education which are integrated throughout the preparation program. We present selected student products included in the learning outcomes assessment and include excerpts from course and internship reflections by students which address special education topics and issues. We also highlight the roles of the preservice supervising mentor and the inservice, first-year mentor in providing a seamless transition to the administrative profession. We conclude with a discussion of implications to further enhance the program’s effectiveness.

Course and Internship Requirements: The Special Education Focus & Integration

The infusion of special education leadership competencies within the principal preparation program at the University of A is delivered through three venues. First, students complete required coursework that addresses, both directly and indirectly, the administration of special education programming. Second, students are required to complete a minimum of fifty hours of internship specifically aligned to special education programming within their school and district. These hours are
individually determined, overseen by a mentor that is typically their building principal, and are followed up with student reflections. Both the specific role of the mentor, and examples of internship reflections are addressed in later sections. Finally, students are required to embed specific program-required internship activities above the minimum fifty hours outlined with their mentor.

Coursework is aligned with both the PSEL and NELP standards for building-level administrators (NPBEA, 2015; NPBEA, 2018) and the CEC standards for special education administrators (CEC, 2009) and content is integrated throughout the preparation program. Students are provided with a strong foundation in the Special Education Law & Policy course with specific expectations and assignments. Students have the opportunity to explore the multi-dimensional work of building leaders aligned with special education: eligibility determination, IEP meeting facilitation, parental partnerships and collaboration, school-based mental health supports (SBMHS), behavior and discipline requirements, transition services, service delivery and instructional models, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), data collection for federal performance indicators, and dispute resolution options including mediation and due process. Case studies and problem-based learning approaches with rich opportunities for student reflection (Zarelsky et al., 2008) are featured in instructional delivery.

Various aspects of the Special Education Law & Policy course are highlighted and integrated with direct principal application in the course, School Governance & Law. While taking this course, students are involved with discussions and reflections surrounding special education programming that includes the principal’s role as the local area education agency representative (LEA), the school’s role in providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), the discipline of students with disabilities, legal challenges surrounding the least restrictive environment (LRE), and the impact of legal challenges and court decisions on serving entitled individuals. Cases law is explored to deepen student’s understanding of legal issues and the subsequent impact on the delivery of special education services.

Special education content is integrated in the course Seminar in School Leadership, which provides additional insight to special education programming with required activities and reflections surrounding the complex world of special education finance in public schools. While school finance is a major part of the preparation program for students completing superintendent training, aspiring principals must understand funding streams that impact them directly at their building level. The need for the inclusion of training that involves the funding of special education programs was further strengthened in a study conducted by Christensen et al. (2013), where the researchers found over 95% of principal respondents indicated a “great/moderate importance” or “highest/very great importance” in the area of “knowledge of funding sources and other resources available for individuals with disabilities” (p. 100).

Another course in the University’s principal preparation program that highlights an understudied aspect of preparation is the Evaluator Approval course, which provides specific licensure for the evaluation of teachers. One specific activity tasks students with mock observations and follow-up formative evaluations of two teachers. While the observation and follow-up evaluation of a special education teacher is not required, such integration is highly suggested by the instructor. In choosing this option, the students then often embark on the understanding of inherent differences between the evaluation of special education teachers as compared to that of general education teachers. “Look fors” might include aspects of progress monitoring, goal setting, goal progress and attainment, specially designed instruction, and oversight of general education teachers providing appropriate accommodations. Such integrated opportunity expands the teacher evaluation competencies to specifically address distinct evaluative considerations for special educators.

Beyond specific coursework, the second expectation found in the University’s principal preparation program includes the completion of a minimum of 50 hours of embedded internship under the direction of a licensed administrator (mentor), and aligned to special education programming. These internship hours are planned in advance, as much as possible, and require the student to take on a
leadership focus within the special education arena. Through logged reflections following completed hours, students often include activities such as serving as the LEA in IEP meetings, facilitating grade level teams’ appropriate accommodations for their students with disabilities, providing coordination of a school’s Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and the oversight of summer programming. The specific role and impact of the internship mentor is described in a later section.

The third expectation involving the infusion and integration of special education leadership within the principal preparation program at the University of A involves specific program-required internship activities. These activities, while overseen by the student’s mentor, are required of all students, regardless of their local context. As a direct result of the programs most recent State Department of Education accreditation review, the principal program made extensive changes to their internship program requiring more program-required activities and fewer locally-designed activities: “the institution of a more structured set of field experiences for future school principals is centrally important to the entire program reform effort” (Nicks et al., 2018, p. 23). One example of an added program-required activity mandates that aspiring principals attend a regional or state conference. While it is not required that students select a conference centered on special education leadership, the vast majority of our students select a conference in this area due to their interest in the complexities of special education leadership. Further, while many students voluntarily chose to attend an IEP meeting, this program-required activity is now mandated for the purpose of the principal’s role. The value of integrating a special education focus in the course, internship, and field-based competencies venues is evident in data aligned with the preparation program’s student learning outcomes. We present selected student products and student reflections to illustrate how this integration enhances the preparation of future administrators.

Student Learning Outcomes and Selected Student Products

To illustrate special education specific learner outcomes, we highlight the requirements of the Special Education Law and Policy course. Several course-level objectives are specified, including (a) identification of federal and state sources of legal authority; (b) discussion of the history of laws for children with disabilities and identify the purpose and the six provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); (c) comparison of federal & state regulations promulgated under the IDEA; and (d) analysis of statutory law, federal and state regulations and current judicial interpretations for distinct requirements of the IDEA [evaluation and eligibility for services, provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate, behavior and disciplinary provisions, specially-designed instruction (SDI) and related services, parental rights]. The student learning outcomes are aligned with both the PSEL standards for building-level administrators (NPBEA, 2015) and CEC standards for special education administrators (CEC, 2009). For example, learning outcome “a” above is aligned with the CEC standard SA1S1: “Interprets and applies current laws, regulations, and policies as they apply to the administration of services to individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families” as well as PSEL standard 9d: “Know, comply with, and help the school community understand local, state, and federal laws, rights, policies, and regulations.”

To achieve these outcomes, students complete several case studies and project-based activities (Zarelsky et al., 2008) throughout the course. The case studies assignments include scenarios involving inclusion/LRE, a manifestation determination for disciplinary action, an eligibility determination for a student with academic deficits, instructional considerations for astudent with autism, and transition planning for secondary students with disabilities. The project-based Side Bar assignments involve collecting district performance data for students with disabilities (e.g., suspension and expulsion statistics indicating disproportionality, results of student academic proficiency), critiquing district special education policies and practices (e.g., IEP meetings, components of 504 plans, paraprofessional services), and
interviewing and shadowing district special education personnel. Noteworthy reflections from the assignments included one student’s awareness of how a principals’ participation in IEP meetings is critical to a successful outcome: “The principal had no relationship with the (special education) student and was unfamiliar with the student or his behavior needs. At one point, the principal began to irritate the student with his suggestions causing the meeting to become tense.” Another student reflected on possible predetermination involved in an IEP meeting and how his learning from the class would have changed his involvement as the educational leader: It did seem that the meeting was somewhat of a checklist. The goals and services moving forward seemed predetermined and parent participation was not really asked for. It was almost as if the parent was just told how everything was going and here is what is going to be put in place...I wish this would have looked more like an actual partnership. If I would have had the information we have been learning in class, I could have directed it abit more in that direction. Another student, reviewing the data on suspensions and expulsions for his district, reflected on possible disproportionality: Students with IEP’s and 504’s represent just under 18% of the total population. However, they make up 55% of the total behavior referrals. At first, I was a bit surprised about these totals. After looking into the data a bit deeper it began to make more sense. If teachers are referring to the actions, students that have behavior IEPs should account for a higher total, and that somewhat justifies the need for the IEP. It gets a bit foggy when teachers give more chances to some students and not others. I often wonder if there is a way to get accurate data in all areas. The case study assignments and project-based reflections from the Special Education Law and Policy course provide prospective educational leaders with real-world examples of the IDEA law in practice. Through data and document analysis, interviews, observations, and self-reflection, these future leaders begin to develop the skills and dispositions to effectively supervise the special education programs in their schools.

**Internship Reflections of Special Education Topics and Issues**

As students navigate the minimum 50 hours of required internship in special education leadership, their subsequent reflections around their work continue to document the need for this integration, and the likelihood that what is required may still not be enough to prepare them for the challenges inherent in the leadership of special education programming. One student documented how the understanding of special education law was vital for aspiring leaders: “Principals must be knowledgeable about IEP and SPED law to answer questions for parents as well as make sure that the IEP’s are being followed. Schools can get into serious trouble if they are not following an IEP.” While attending a recent conference on special education, one student’s comments resonated strongly in support of increased exposure around special education finance: “This experience taught me much about a topic I had no previous knowledge of. I learned about the intricacies of school funding, special education reimbursement, and Medicaid funding.” Another student, following his attendance at an IEP meeting, stated: “As an aspiring administrator you must stay up to date with special education protocols, laws, and best educational practice.” Finally, one student’s recent reflection outlines the importance of the preparation program’s continued evaluation of their inclusion of special education leadership: “I’m starting to realize how important and time consuming special education can be. Administrators must be well versed and up to date with special education laws and regulations.”

Embedded internships around special education leadership, followed by deep reflections highlighting students’ key takeaways and learning, are a vital aspect of leadership preparation programs. As Gray et al. (2007) remind us, “built right, the internship becomes a sturdy vessel upon which new practitioners can navigate the swift, unpredictable currents that separate classroom theory and on-the-job reality” (p. 3). This movement from theory to practice is reinforced when students are required to reflect on their experience and growth. After all, “self-reflection is the key to learning. And learning is the
key to growing. If you are not making time for self-reflection, you are not making time for growth” (Matlock, 2017, para. 1). Research suggests that the opportunity to collaborate with an experienced administrative mentor enhances the value of these field-based experiences.

**The Role of Mentors**

The empirical literature consistently confirms the importance of mentoring in leadership development (Geer et al., 2014) and the mutual benefits of active, authentic partnerships with field-based experts for both student protege and mentors (Clayton et al., 2012). With an abundance of research highlighting how an internship’s effectiveness is related to the guidance provided by an on-site mentor (Gray et al., 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2007), we provide context on how this is accomplished in the University of A’s principal preparation program. The mentor-guided internship is aligned with a leadership coaching and mentoring model (Gray, 2018) to “prepare, support and sustain new school leaders in the field and profession” (p. 1). The model involves university faculty providing leadership-focused coaching during practica and internships, while partnering with school districts who provide mentoring support and experienced leaders as mentors. The faculty leadership coaches assist the novice in setting goals and improving leadership skills throughout the internship (Lochmiller, 2014) and provide professional development opportunities for the mentor principal leaders and field supervisors. According to program guidelines, mentors agree to guide candidates through program-required and field-based internships. These experiences should provide candidates with appropriate and genuine opportunities for leadership development. Mentors must be certified and practicing administrators, and the selection process is a shared endeavor between the candidate and faculty. While it is typical that on-site administrators practicing in the same building as the candidate are chosen, what is most important is that chosen mentors have the authority and ability to provide quality experiences that “open doors” for their aspiring leaders: “by improving the quality of mentoring and internship experiences, universities and districts can increase the ability of new school leaders to address real school problems before they leave the starting gate for their first principalship” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 11). This type of high quality partnership between the university and districts is pivotal as university-based courses stress the importance of creating a theory to practice experience and vital in assuring prospective administrators have authentic, genuine opportunities to study the special education contexts in schools.

In the University of A’s principal preparation program, mentors stay in consistent contact throughout the duration of the program with faculty field supervisors or “leadership coaches” (Gray, 2018). These faculty field supervisors are retired administrators with extensive knowledge and recent experience; crucial to assisting in the communication and oversight of each candidate’s internship plan. This consistent communication also provides additional resources for support and assists faculty in keeping coursework relevant and timely (i.e. theory to practice). Along with the communication and oversight, field supervisors work directly with mentors through the evaluation of the on-site candidates that occurs once per semester. These evaluations provide candidates with a consistent review of their progress, aligned with the expectations of the national standards, and they also pinpoint areas of experience that are lacking (Lochmiller, 2014). These conversations greatly assist the on-site mentor in better understanding opportunities that need to be uncovered. After all, “until [preparation programs] provide the resources and structures to ensure that every mentor has the ability and support to manage challenging experiences for interns in real-school situations, the value of the mentoring process to enhance leadership preparation - and ultimately to raise student achievement - is severely limited” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 12). Positive outcomes of mentoring to the protégé include increased professional opportunities, job satisfaction, and desirable career outcomes (Eby et al., 2008). Mentors give professional advice, help their less-experienced proteges solve complex work problems, and serve as
partners in processing situations and experiences (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). The complexities associated with special education program administration are particularly well-suited for mentor collaboration and guidance.

In the state where the University of A is located, once an administrative candidate completes their preparation program and is hired as a building administrator, their mentoring does not cease. Many new district administrators have few opportunities to learn alongside seasoned mentors in the field. Educational leaders must continue to learn on the job, but some may be working in isolated silos, miles away from colleagues who are able to identify with the work related challenges (Augustine-Shaw & Funk, 2013). First-year mentoring programs help new administrators “bridge the gap between what they enter their new leadership position knowing, and what they need to know in order to grow while on the job” (p. 19). First-year mentoring has been associated with positive benefits such as increased retention of educational leaders in schools, building leadership capacity through interaction with experienced mentors, enhancing reflection of the impact of decisions and actions, and increased confidence. Through the state’s School Administrators organization, one year of mentoring is required by state law for new principals upon accepting their first position. Mentoring training is required for both the mentor and mentee, as well as periodic statewide meetings, weekly check-ins, and monthly face-to-face meetings. The importance of a mentoring relationship both during an administrator preparation program as well as upon initial hire sends “strong messages that high-quality internships for aspiring principals are essential to prepare future school administrators who can lead teaching and learning improvement” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 22). Mentors play an important role in encouraging and supporting entrance and advancement in leadership.

Discussion and Implications

Comprehensive and effective administrator preparation should include various dimensions, including coursework and content specific to special education. The preparation program must also include field-based practica or internships under the supervision of mentors familiar with special education responsibilities. The comprehensive preparation program should also clearly identify student learning outcomes associated with special education expertise and plans to assess those outcomes.

In presenting the University’s Administrator Preparation Program, four implications were identified. First, the Evaluator Approval class should require one of the mock observations and follow-up formative evaluations be conducted with a special education teacher. A study conducted by The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (TQ Center) (2010) found nearly one half of respondents believed that special education teachers should not be evaluated in the same manner as their general education counterparts and that absent a clear understanding of the special skills and instructional methods necessary for effective instruction of students with disabilities, the ability to distinguish between effective and ineffective instruction in these classrooms is quite limited. Principal preparation programs must incorporate the use of alternative evaluation systems for special education teachers with evaluation rubrics that include performance domains and metrics specific to teaching of students with disabilities.

One example of alternative evaluation models specifically aligned for special education teachers comes from Virginia Commonwealth University’s Autism Center for Excellence (2015), and could be utilized as an excellent guide for enhancing the Evaluator Approval course required in most principal preparation programs. One example involves the need to evaluate a teachers’ performance in the setting of appropriate goals for students with disabilities. One specific standard found within the Performance Standards Rubric for Special Education Teachers includes a category that states “Bases instruction on goals that reflect high expectations and are based on students’ IEPs” (VCU Autism Center for Excellence, 2015). Utilizing rubrics like this that identify specific areas to look for when evaluating special education teachers,
can provide aspiring principals with the necessary tools that delineate the key differences between evaluating the quality of instruction provided by special education teachers as compared to general education teachers. Other standards include instructional planning, instructional delivery, assessment of and for student learning, learning environment, and professionalism.

Secondly, while most program evaluation models involve the solicitation of student feedback to improve the quality of their overall program, the model used in the Principal Preparation program at the University of A does not gather specific feedback around students’ perceptions of their leadership preparation for special education programming. An end-of-program survey item addressing this question should be added.

Third, better utilization of the program’s advisory councils is warranted. Intentional discussions specific to the necessary leadership skills for principals would provide social validity of the program content.

A final implication is the need to collect, utilize and embed the insightful and rich feedback from graduates now serving as principals within new preparation program requirements. Their voices also highlight the need to infuse additional resources and panel-type discussions that are specific to the leadership of special education programming. One limitation of the proposed preparation model involves differences in state-mandated accreditation. Since states vary in accreditation requirements, some suggestions and recommendations for improvements may not be applicable for national replication.

The successful administration of special education programs requires multiple, complex responsibilities. Research suggests that most administrators perceive a lack of preparedness to meet their duties and responsibilities for special education. The failure to adequately prepare prospective administrators in preservice preparation programs results in costly consequences for school districts, including increased administrative attrition, low career satisfaction, and litigation. The comprehensive, multi-dimensional university program may provide a model for assuring future LEA leaders have the knowledge and skills to effectively administer the special education programs in their schools and districts.
References


National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. (2010). Survey of special educators conducted by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality with support from the Council for Exceptional Children [aggregated survey results]. Washington, DC.


Petzko, V. (2008). The perceptions of new principals regarding the knowledge and skills important to their initial success. NASSP Bulletin, 92(3), 224-250.


Appendix

University of A Principal Preparation program

This two-year program is designed for persons seeking endorsement in the state as a PK-12 Principal/PK-12 Supervisor of Special Education. Students gain hands-on experience through an internship where work products and skills are developed.

This performance-based program is unique in that it minimizes student class time and maximizes on-site skill development while working with a mentor. Students entering this program are required to devote a considerable amount of time in an internship experience where work products and skills are developed.

Program Highlights include:
Program completion in 2 years — 35 units of graduate credit via 13 courses and extensive internship experiences

Program delivered one night per week during the fall and spring semesters via interactive video conferencing. The first summer session includes a 6-day on-campus experience. Coursework and some courses are offered entirely online using Blackboard, a learning management system.

Cohort delivery model — build a network and study with the same group of adult learners for the duration of the program

Students are provided a mentor, field supervisor, and an advisor to assist in successful and timely completion of the program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to Leadership Standards (2 cr)</td>
<td>Leading School Growth &amp; Improvement (2 cr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Mgmt for Student Learning (3 cr)</td>
<td>Educational Research (3 cr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluator Approval (3 cr)</td>
<td>Internship (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading Learning, Teaching &amp; Curriculum (3 cr)</td>
<td>Community Connections or Activities Admin (2 cr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship (1 cr)</td>
<td>Special Education Law &amp; Policy (3 cr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership for Effective Schools (3 cr)</td>
<td>Capstone in Educational Leadership (1 cr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar: School Leadership (2 cr)</td>
<td>Leading Instruction in Schools (3 cr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Governance &amp; Law (3 cr)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The program consistently admits between 50-60 new students each fall semester