TRANSFORMING SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICES

A Primer For School Administrators And Policy Makers
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AASA National Conference 2013
Chapter 1

The Superintendent’s Role in Special Education Leadership

Change and collaboration do not come naturally or easily. The challenges facing superintendents in the oversight of special education programs are many, and should necessitate the following actionable items:

- Obtain consensus from staff and parents;
- Promote the district’s vision to all stakeholder groups: work with special education parents and advocates to find common ground and to clearly define FAPE and LRE in order to meet needs of students with disabilities;
- Find the proper experts to provide embedded professional development;
Chapter 1
The Superintendent’s Role in Special Education Leadership

- Create efficiencies in personnel scheduling and workloads;
- Understand that special education is really a general education challenge;
- Change pedagogy to meet the needs of all students with realistic instructional goals and objectives for all students that are quantifiable and verifiable;
- Create a collaborative environment so general education staff understand the instructional needs of special education students, and promote a collaborative spirit that outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the entire instructional program;
Chapter 1
The Superintendent’s Role in Special Education Leadership

- Create valid and reliable site-specific documentation systems that support the needs of all students and ensure compliance;
- Create a valid system of internal accountability that goes beyond assessment;
- Build staff appreciation that special education services are ideally provided on a temporary basis with specific goals for declassification when appropriate;
- Promote and understanding of the prereferral process.
Chapter 2
Organizational, Personnel, and Fiscal Considerations in the Oversight of Special Education Services

- The organizational structure of the department responsible for special education should be compatible with the needs and organizational model of the district.

- Selecting effective administrators and leaders whose vision and capacities are aligned with that of the district is essential.

- Special education leaders must be cognizant of general education structure and issues, and be proactive in collaborating with leaders in this area.
General education leaders must also be knowledgeable about special education and work cooperatively with special educators to provide effective and efficient programs and services aligned to free appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE).

The lines of communication between the superintendent and the leadership of special education must be established and maintained in an effective manner.

Throughout the district, both general and special education programs must build a shared capacity to educate students with special needs.
Chapter 3

Forming a Necessary Partnership

Engaging the Families of Special Needs Students – An International Perspective

- Recognize the difference between involvement and engagement.
- Create an ongoing process of assessing parents’ perceived needs, interests, and wishes in relation to their children’s education.
- Be aware of the barriers that prevent parental engagement such as time, cost, transportation, child care, language spoken at home, lack of technology, and level of parent education and plan concrete strategies to eliminate or minimize them.
Chapter 3

Forming a Necessary Partnership

Engaging the Families of Special Needs Students – An International Perspective

- Provide opportunities for families to learn alongside their children and adolescents, especially when new curricula and new uses of technology are involved.
- Dedicate time and resources to educating and coaching/mentoring faculty and staff on ways to promote family engagement.
- Honor the principle that the transfer of knowledge and cultural understanding must flow equally from school to family and family to school by creating opportunities for families to provide expertise to the school community.
Chapter 3

Forming a Necessary Partnership
Engaging the Families of Special Needs Students – An International Perspective

- Provide equitable co-curricular opportunities for special needs students and their families and celebrate their successes in these venues.
- Tap the rich resources of the community to support special needs families.
- Strategize with families to prevent the drop-off of family involvement in secondary school initiatives.
Paraprofessional services may constitute up to 4% of a district’s annual operating budget and thus warrant careful monitoring just like other educational programs and investments.

School districts rarely have protocols to determine when paraprofessional services would be beneficial or when services should be removed to avoid having a negative impact on the academic and social/emotional growth and development of the students receiving such services. Determining and tracking the ongoing need for paraprofessional services involve a standardized protocol that considers information gathered through a baseline measurement, follow up, and reconsideration information steps.
Ensuring that paraprofessional services are efficient and ensuring that they are effective are not mutually exclusive concepts. Schools can do the right thing for students while being judicious in allocating personnel and fiscal resources.
Create a culture that is transparent and is inclusive, including staff from both general and special education. The budget and finances have an impact on the entire district.

Develop a dialogue and be part of the financial conversation. The superintendent’s voice and vision must lead the dialogue.

Develop job-embedded special education professional development that deals with finance, staffing, and scheduling to create efficiencies across all programs.
Chapter 5
Methods to Meet the Budget Challenges in Special Education

- Develop external partners. Too often internal staff are too acculturated and committed to their own mission. Private companies and service centers can provide the external partner needed.

- Use data as a tool to inform and decide. A regular flow of data from the special education department to the superintendent must be systemic and regularly updated.
With the reauthorization of IDEA, clinicians’ roles have changed. They are now charged with the requirement to practice within an educational model as opposed to a clinical or educational model – goals and objectives must be tied to the student’s need to access his or her curriculum.

The definitions of free appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE) must be considered in the context of placement discussions for students who qualify for special education, as well as in clinical decisions surrounding the frequency and duration of related services.
NCLB and IDEA are similar in that both pieces of legislation are predicated on improving the educational success of both general and special education students. Both laws emphasize accountability, measurable outcomes, and meeting specific standards, all of which apply specifically to both the direct and indirect services provided by related service professional staff.

The updated IDEA requires related service providers to recognize an increased emphasis on the need for general and special education to have challenging expectations that lead to productive and independent adult lives. The concepts of academic achievement, functional performance, and developmental needs now take precedence over simple educational performance.
Chapter 6
NCLB and IDEA
Related Services and the Law

- The “A” in a FAPE has legal precedent defined as adequate, reasonable, and required for a student to access his or her curriculum. Districts are not compelled to attempt to maximize the educational benefit of services for a student beyond that definition.

- Appropriate supervision, management, and oversight are key components of successful related services delivery systems and should include outcome data from each clinical provider.
Chapter 7
Superintendents’ Use of Special Education Data and Performance Measures in an Environment of Accountability

- Sort through the mountains of data to get to the data that will help you to make informed decisions about programs and individual students.
- Understand the data, and make use of the appropriate data to support student learning.
- Know the master schedules, staffing plans, and transportation needs in each building.
- Spend the appropriate time with the special education director and building administrators to ensure your understanding of all programs.
Chapter 8

Special Education Transportation

Why It Is Expensive and What Can Be Done to Reduce the Cost

- School transportation services are one of the many services that school districts must provide as a bundle of special education and related services for students with disabilities.

- School transportation is one of the most highly regulated and monitored forms of transportation. Given the amount of law and regulation associated with the provision of special education services, including transportation as a related service, it is no small wonder why special education transportation is expensive.
Whenever possible, students with disabilities should ride regular buses. Special buses should only be utilized when a student cannot access regular transportation services safely.

When considering whether the transportation system is cost-effective and efficient, ask two questions: Is the service being provided satisfactory, and is the cost reasonable? An efficient transportation system is one that provides high-quality service at an acceptable cost.
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Special Education Transportation
*Why It Is Expensive and What Can Be Done to Reduce the Cost*

- If the district’s school transportation operation is providing a high level of service quality at a reasonable cost then there is no financial incentive to consider outsourcing or contracting out for school transportation services.
- Routing and scheduling probably has the single biggest impact on the efficiency of any transportation system. From the routes and schedules developed come both the number of vehicles required and the amount of driver time required to meet the district’s and the students’ transportation requirements.
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- Public bidding for school transportation services should be utilized whenever possible. Legitimate competition can lead to lower costs and a higher quality of service.