

**Article Analysis:**

**Preparing Principals for Leadership in Special Education: Applying ISLLC**

**Standards**

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## PREPARING PRINCIPALS FOR LEADERSHIP IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The main purpose of this article was to examine the extent to which college preparation programs for building-level school administrators have prepared principals for leadership roles in special education. The authors address gaps and variations in school leadership programs and respond to principals who reported feeling unprepared for the unique issues associated with special education programs and students in their buildings.

The authors of the article, *Preparing Principals for Leadership in Special Education: Applying ISLLC Standards* (2005), examine the six Interstate School Leaders' Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and administrative preparatory programs leading to administrative licensure to determine if the programs actually prepare principals to address the needs of all students, or just the non-disabled students in general education classes. The authors then make recommendations for preparatory programs that would integrate the needs of all students, including those with disabilities.

The ISLLC created these standards for states to reference when addressing licensure requirements for school administrators. To date, 40 states have adopted the ISLLC standards. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) also developed similar standards.

The most important information in this article is in the standards themselves. "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of **all** students by:

1. Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

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2. Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3. Ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4. Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5. Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6. Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison-Wade look at each standard in relation to special education leadership.

*Standard 1- School administrators will promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.* However, school administration is all too commonly divided, with the building administrators addressing the gen ed. populations and district-level directors or department chairpersons addressing the concerns of the special needs populations. With increased numbers of students with special needs re-entering their home districts, building administrators without the specialized knowledge and training of special education issues are often unable to develop and implement a vision that includes them.

*Standard 2- School administrators will promote the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.* Students with special needs

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are not the only ones being left out of this standard. Special educators in buildings with administrators who lack special education training and experience too often find themselves lacking the direct, immediate support they need and report suffering from a lack of appropriate staff development applicable to the needs of their programs and students.

*Standard 3- School administrators will promote the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.* Some populations of students with disabilities make maintaining "safe, efficient, and effective learning environments" uniquely challenging. Building administrators cannot ensure a safe learning environment without knowledge of the possible behaviors that may accompany students with disabilities, becoming personally familiar with special education classes and students in the building, and knowing the appropriate, legal ways to handle these behaviors.

*Standard 4- School administrators will promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.* Building administrators cannot hope to respond to community interests and needs without training, knowledge, and experience with all of the populations, both general and special education, they will be facing. Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison-Wade suggest that principal's knowledge about special education affect their attitudes, and therefore, their effectiveness as leaders for these populations.

*Standard 5 states that school administrators will promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.* Fairness is a fluid

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term when it comes to special education. A student with a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) may need to be able to "earn" prizes or special privileges for behaving in a way that the majority of other students are expected to behave without reward. This can create unique challenges for building administrators with experience and training only in situations where disciplinary procedures are designed to be generic and "one size fits all".

*Standard 6- School administrators promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.* Special education populations do not only bring unique behavioral, curricular, social, and behavioral challenges, but special education is based upon and saturated in laws unique to its populations. If building administrators are not familiar with the unique needs of the special education population within their building, and mindful of the plethora of laws guiding special education, they will be unable to address those needs in their buildings and within the larger context of the society.

The main points that are inferred in this article are that:

- There is a trend of turnover in building level administration which will increasingly result in building principals who are less experienced and who are likely to enter their positions without adequate training to lead all of their staff and students.
- Building and districts led by individuals not trained in special education laws and practice may find themselves at risk of increased disconnect with their special education staff, students, and community and possibly incur increased litigation.
- Buildings and districts without administrators knowledgeable in special education risk losing quality special educators who either leave teaching, or switch from special education to general education due to lack of support.

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- True collaboration can only exist between special education staff, students, community, and building-level administrators when all parties share the knowledge, jargon, and concerns of the special education populations.

The authors offer suggestions as to how necessary changes could come about. First, in order for building administrators to be effective, they have to actually become part of the program, not delegating responsibility for special education classes and programs to chairpersons or assistant principals. Second, administrative preparation programs must require special education components addressing programs, practice, as well as special education law and ensure that successful candidates are prepared to lead special education programs, staff, and students.

The points made by these authors are valid, timely, and necessary. Students with disabilities are back in our buildings and communities. They are covered by a wide variety of laws, and come with unique challenges to school districts that are not prepared for them. It is up to the building leadership programs to step up and include coursework in special education that addresses these needs and prepares principals to effectively lead ALL of the students in their building.