

The Right I.D.E.A.

John Robinson was a special education teacher for nearly 30 years. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), he said, was needed. The law, which was passed by Congress in 1975, gives students with emotional, learning, and physical disabilities an opportunity to have access to a quality education.

“It gave us a road map to follow in terms of being consistent in interpreting the law,” said Robinson.

But now that Robinson is principal of the Douglass School, a middle and high school in Leesburg, Va., he faces new and different challenges. As a principal, Robinson has to ensure that enough special education teachers are available. He also deals daily with the loads of IDEA-related paperwork and disciplinary procedures as well as the funding issues associated with running this type of program.

Like many principals, Robinson admits that sometimes it can be difficult keeping up with IDEA-related matters. And just when administrators begin to understand the law, it changes with more regulations and procedures—just as it did when Congress last reauthorized IDEA in 1997.

As Congress begins to look at another reauthorization this year, Robin-

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Knowledge is key

In an article published last year in the *ERS Spectrum Journal of School Research and Information*, authors Donica Davidson and John Gooden asked, “Are we preparing beginning principals for the special education challenges they will encounter?”

The authors found that “having knowledgeable principals is key to ensuring that educational programs and services for students with disabilities are managed effectively.” A knowledgeable principal, the authors note, provides guidance and recommends professional development to staff members. Seminars and workshops on instructional practices and procedures help staff understand how to better implement IDEA.

Unfortunately, in a number of studies conducted in recent years, principals have repeatedly admitted they have inadequate knowledge and preparation to ensure that errors in IDEA compliance do not occur.

Superintendents and school board members should be aware of the areas

BY BETTY GREENE-BRYANT

in which principals have sufficient knowledge and skills, as well as those areas in which gaps exist. District leaders, for example, can require an ongoing evaluation process that includes multiple sources of information. This information will assist superintendents in arranging professional development opportunities that meet principals' needs and build competencies over time.

But more important, high quality professional growth opportunities will result in improved instructional and managerial leadership. Carrie Stockbridge, principal of Homme Visions Junior/Senior High School in Wittenberg, Wis., believes professional development helps principals have a better understanding of the needs of children with disabilities.

"Principals understand what the responsibilities are in terms of the legalities of IDEA," Stockbridge said. "But professional development will help them become more aware of how they can best meet the needs of children with disabilities."

Principals speak

In 2001, the National Association of Secondary School Principals surveyed 566 members to determine the types of professional development that principals need to improve the implementation of IDEA. The majority of participants were principals (62 percent); 32 percent were assistant principals; and the remaining were either teachers (4 percent) or department chairs (2 percent).

Participants were asked to comment on issues that were considered essential for principals in ensuring quality special education services. The topics included:

- **Leadership.** Principals answered questions relating to their personal knowledge of IDEA, the extent to which students with disabilities are included in school improvement plans, and strategies they use to support achievement for special education students.

- **Curriculum and instruction.** Questions covered the accessibility of instructional materials, staff members' knowledge of issues related to IDEA, and best practices for instructing students with disabilities.

- **Professional development.** The section examined the different types of training offered and the focus of training sessions.

- **Other issues.** Information was solicited on topics such as family and community involvement, legislative issues, litigation, and due process hearings.

Overall, the survey found that secondary school administrators generally feel knowledgeable about the 1997 version of IDEA. In fact, more than 50 percent of respondents said they were very knowledgeable and less than 10 percent reported having little or no knowledge.

Most principals believe they demonstrate leadership in special education throughout their schools. Ninety-one percent said they encourage teacher collaboration to improve outcomes for all students. More than 85 percent said that they support professional staff development related to IDEA. And nearly 80 percent attend workshops and in-service training events re-

lated to IDEA and include students with disabilities in school activities and reform efforts.

These findings suggest that principals generally are comfortable with the legislation. Principals demonstrate their commitment to educating all students through their actions and procedures and the types of support they give the staff. School activities appear to include students with disabilities, which would suggest at least a general level of knowledge and skill on the part of principals and their staff.

What principals need

The survey identified several areas in which principals perceived their staff members to have considerable knowledge. Those areas included: inclusive practices (59 percent), individualized education programs (54 percent), parent participation (51 percent), and instructional practices and curriculum (50 percent).

Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported that their district offered staff development to teachers on instructional practices that can help disabled students progress in the general education curriculum. At the same time, 75 percent of all respondents said they believe that teachers need more professional development to fully understand IDEA.

The survey identified a number of areas that posed challenges for principals and staff members. These include transition services, postsecondary issues, assistive technology, state and districtwide assessment of students with disabilities, and positive behavioral interventions.

Robinson said his biggest challenge has been finding special education educators. He wants personnel who are dual certified in special education and a core subject.

"I need teachers who know the students and their needs, but also the content," said Robinson. "That's a difficult find."

Robinson also believes that school leaders should receive more guidance and clear instructions on controversial issues such as discipline.

"There are times when we lose perspective of what the law is trying to do," said Robinson. "There are some problems in there, like providing students with disabilities with more rights than we have with some general education students."

Although principals believe most staff members have at least some minimal level of knowledge related to IDEA, and that they support achievement for students with disabilities, much room for improvement remains.

Provide professional development

Clearly, what principals know about IDEA should be considered when planning professional development opportunities. But superintendents and school boards can support principals in helping children with disabilities achieve by making sure that they receive the information they need. While many principals surveyed know the basics about IDEA, a fair number reported having little or no knowledge of the legislation.

In addition to providing professional development sessions, school boards and superintendents may encourage staff mem-

bers to pursue knowledge and skills through other means. Principals should include specialized topics as part of their personal growth plan. School board members can encourage deputy and other central office administrators to include special education issues as a discussion topic during appointed cluster or regional meetings with principals.

But whatever the means, it should be noted that an effective professional development program furthers the school's mission and goals. School boards should ensure that information related to IDEA and other specialized topics is available and accessible to staff members on an ongoing basis.

In the context of supporting achievement for all students, including students with disabilities, school boards must remember that they are charged with the responsibility to work

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cooperatively with the superintendent to provide high quality programs and services for all students. Therefore, a districtwide vision and mission that speak to all students must be at the forefront of strategic and school improvement plans.

School boards and superintendents have an important role

to play in helping staff members develop knowledge and competencies necessary for success. They must be supportive leaders who help nurture and cultivate a climate of continuous learning.

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Resources on IDEA

THE FOLLOWING resources were gathered in conjunction with the IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators Partnership project at the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). The program helps support the dissemination of reliable and accurate information about IDEA. For more information, see the organization's Web site at <http://www.idea.practices.org> or the CEC's Web site, <http://www.cec.sped.org>.

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