An Administrative Approach for Special Educator Retention

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Abstract

Special education teacher attrition is an ongoing area of concern across the US. One factor that influences special educator attrition and retention is administrative support. Unfortunately, administrators often enter school leadership positions with little or no background in special education, thus making it difficult to provide the much-needed support. This practitioner piece provides information and resources for school-based administrators to use to support special education teachers and students within their schools.

Mrs. Smith is a special educator who teaches high school students in a self-contained classroom. She currently has eight students with autism and/or intellectual disabilities. Mrs. Smith leads her class into the hallway for lunch. As they are walking out of the classroom one of her students runs away from the group towards the cafeteria. The principal, Mr. Thomas, watches from afar and asks Mrs. Smith how her day is going as he casually passes the group. Mrs. Smith swiftly runs past Mr. Thomas without responding, leaving the rest of her class behind with a paraprofessional. As a first-year principal and a former general education teacher, Mr. Thomas realizes how little he knows about the daily demands of a special educator. He reflects upon his own actions. "Should I have stepped in? She is the expert though, surely she would have told me! How could I have better supported the teacher and student in that situation?"

Unfortunately, Mr. Thomas' situation is very common. According to Parker (2016), there is little research on the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education. Additionally, special education teacher positions have one of the highest turnover rates among educational fields. There is a national shortage of both general education and special education teachers that continues to grow each year. The national turnover rate of special education teachers is 25% and has been for the last 20 years (IRIS Center, 2021). That is more than double the rate of general education teachers (DeMonte et al., 2016). One factor that impacts teacher attrition and retention is administrative support (Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers have cited support from their administrators as being highly influential in terms of whether they leave or stay in the profession (Grant, 2017). According to Andrews & Brown (2015), the majority (98%) of teachers interviewed thought that prior to getting their first teaching job, that the principal would create a "positive environment for learning." After only the first year, the percentage of those first-year teachers dropped more than 10% as they realized they did not have

as much support as they anticipated. According to the same authors, 43% of teachers do not feel like they are respected by society. In order for teachers to remain teaching and enjoying their job, they must feel supported and respected by their coworkers, administrators, and the society as a whole.

Even though most administrators have good intentions, many administrators do not know how best to support special education teachers due to lack of experience in the field and lack of training. In principal preparation programs, there is little focus on special education. Figure 1 highlights some professional standards for school leaders from the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) to show the small amount of focus on special education. There are ten professional standards put forward by the NPBEA. It is also important to note the organizations that worked on writing these standards did not include any organization related to special education, even though students who receive special education make up 14% of the school population nationwide (NCES, 2020). This is a large percentage of the school population, so principals should receive training on how to best meet the needs of these students as well as how to support the staff that work with these students.

Figure 1
Professional Educational Administration Standards Related to Special Education

Standard	Relation to Special Education
Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Promoting a student-centered environment to allow success for all students. Advocate for inclusiveness and equity.
Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	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 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Ensure instructional practice that is intellectually challenging, authentic to student experiences, recognizes student strengths, and is differentiated and personalized.
Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students	Provide coherent systems of academic and social supports, services, extracurricular activities, and accommodations to meet the range of learning needs of each student.

The purpose of this article is to support administrators in working with special education teachers and staff. Resources and information are provided to better prepare and inform administrators on how to provide support to individuals with disabilities. Administrators can use this as a resource, or guide, in order to gain confidence in their ability to provide support for special education teachers and students.

Later in the afternoon Mr. Thomas sees Mrs. Smith in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. He is shocked that she is so composed and organized, considering the state she was in just a few hours earlier. Mr. Thomas typically sits silently in meetings and nods and agrees, but really does not understand the lingo. "OT, PT, MSD, BIP? What does it all mean?" Mr. Thomas decides to make an effort to become better informed on the common acronyms used so he can be an active member of the meeting. He pulls Mrs. Smith to the side after and asks for clarification.

Common Acronyms in Special Education

In the field of special education, many acronyms are used. These acronyms are common and well-known by the special education teachers, but can be confusing to administrators or individuals who are not familiar with special education. Some of these acronyms are used when speaking about service providers like speech language therapists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists. Other acronyms are for legal documents, disability categories, or educational

strategies. Figure 2 provides some commonly used acronyms to help administrators feel more

knowledgeable in IEP meetings and when discussing these terms with special education teachers.

Figure 2

Common Special Education Acronyms

Common Special Education Acronyms		
Acronym	**Meaning**	**Examples**
AT	Assistive Technology	Text-to-Speech for reading, calculators, pencil grips, closed captioning on videos, devices with voice output
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Common characteristics of students with ASD: deficits in social communication and interaction and restricted, repetitive behavior
BIP	Behavior Intervention Plan	A document used to describe a student's behavior, the function of the behavior based on data, and a school plan for supporting the student's needs to decrease problem behavior. This is a legal-binding document that must be followed by all staff working with the student.
CBI	Community Based Instruction	Facilitates learning in the community setting in order to generalize previously taught skills such as grocery shopping, paying for items, and social skills. Allows students to learn in the natural setting.
FBA	Functional Behavior Assessment	A type of assessment that allows a team to gather data to help show why a student may be exhibiting certain behaviors. This assessment is used to create intervention plans that are used in the BIP.
IEP	Individualized Education Program	A legal document listing student modifications and accommodations and the type of instruction that students benefit best from. This helps to allow students with disabilities access to the same curriculum that students without disabilities are exposed to.
MSD	Moderate/Severe Disabilities	Students in the MSD setting have cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior that is three standard deviations below their same-age peers.
OT	Occupational Therapy/Therapist	A therapist that works on fine motor skills that assist in everyday life. These may include grasping items (e.g., pencils, scissors, utensils), writing/typing, hand-eye coordination, etc.
PT	Physical Therapy/Therapist	A therapist that focuses on gross motor skills that are needed for everyday functions. These include walking, sitting up, jumping, climbing, etc.
SLP	Speech/Language Pathologist	Focuses on vocal communication, teaching students to use communication devices, and also feeding plans for students who need assistance.

The next week, Mr. Thomas is walking down the hall as Mrs. Smith is taking her students to the bus. Mr. Thomas asks a student how his day was. The student opens his iPad to respond to his question, but Mr. Thomas has a meeting and needs to leave. He says, "I hope it was good" and waves goodbye. As he walks away, he wonders what the student was trying to tell him. The next day, he sees another student using a similar device to talk with a staff member in the cafeteria and enjoys seeing this interaction. He reflects on the afternoon before and decides to go back to the classroom to apologize to the student for not waiting. He tells him that he wants to know how his day is going. The student smiles and begins to type out a sentence on his iPad.

Student Dignity and Communication

Anything educators do for students, with or without disabilities, should focus on student dignity. Dignity plays a role in quality of life. Schloss et al. (1993) define dignity as the ability for people to make choices when it comes to residential life, recreation, and work; a privilege that most human beings are awarded. This ability to make choices allows students with disabilities the same opportunities of dignity as their peers without disabilities while teaching and preparing them for jobs and community life outside of school. One example of student dignity is self-determination which includes the right to be able to make your own choices.

One small step in supporting self-determination skills, like making choices, is to ensure that students can communicate. Not all students communicate the same way; some use their voices, some use American Sign Language (ASL), some use gestures, and others use communication output devices. No matter the mode of communication, all students should be treated with the same respect and dignity. Sometimes it may take a student longer to type a sentence on a communication device than it does to verbally speak that same sentence. It is important that teachers and administrators support the student as they are working on their mode

of communication. Take the time to learn how each student communicates so you can build a relationship through simple greetings in the hallway or brief conversations when time allows. This simple communication with students lets them know that they matter and their voice is heard.

When interacting with a non-verbal communicator, provide wait time for the student to use their device or gestures to communicate. Show calm body language and an eager smile so that the student knows the person they are communicating with cares and wants to hear what they have to say. Oftentimes, you can respond verbally as you would to another student. If you suddenly need to leave during an interaction, let the student know you have to go and will come back to talk soon, as opposed to just walking away. Figure 3 outlines basic communication rights for students with disabilities (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2022). It is important that administrators respect these rights while interacting with students in the hallway or in the classroom.

Figure 3

Communication Bill of Rights

Communication Bill of Rights	
The right to interact socially, maintain social closeness, and build relationships.	The right to express personal preferences and feelings.
The right to access environmental contexts, interactions, and opportunities that promote participation as full communication partners with other people, including peers.	The right to have communication acts acknowledged and responded to even when the desired outcome cannot be realized.
The right to make comments and share opinions.	The right to be treated with dignity and addressed with respect and courtesy.
The right to be addressed directly and not be spoken for or talked about in the third person while present.	The right to have clear, meaningful, and culturally and linguistically appropriate communications.

Mr. Thomas sees Kaleb, one of Mrs. Smith's students, struggling behaviorally in health class. He immediately calls Mrs. Smith to come get him, even though he is currently in the general education health room. Mrs. Smith explains that she is currently teaching reading and he is receiving his time with general education peers. She asks if the health teacher is following his behavior plan? She further explains the importance that the general education teacher and other staff follow the behavior plan in order to proactively set Kaleb up for success. Mr. Thomas doesn't understand why she can't just come get him; he always works well for her.

Behavior Expectations Outside the Special Education Classroom

Behavior Expectations in General Education

Students with disabilities legally have a right to spend a certain amount of the school day in classes with same-aged peers without disabilities. They also legally have a right to receive a certain number of minutes with a special education teacher as determined in their IEP. As an administrator, it is essential to ensure that students are receiving their outlined supports in the general education setting as opposed to being removed in instances of behavior concerns in order to stay in compliance with their IEP. If this becomes a consistent concern, even with the outlined supports and accommodations, then an IEP meeting can be held with all stakeholders, including parents, to brainstorm solutions and revise the IEP in order to better support the student. Frequently removing a student from a general education environment can lead to being out of compliance regarding the student's least restrictive environment (LRE).

Students with more extensive behavioral needs may have a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). This is a data driven document to help ensure that all people working with a particular student follow the same plan when responding to problem behavior a student is displaying. This includes preventative strategies such as social stories, seating arrangements in the classroom, or

teacher-specific behaviors. The best way to support a student in their least restrictive environment is for everyone who works with that student, including the general education teachers and administration, to be familiar with the student's BIP. Being familiar with the students who have BIPs increases the likelihood of student success.

Not only does better supporting students in the general education setting help the students, but it is essential for special education teachers as well. Oftentimes, special educators are asked to respond during their preparation periods, personal lunches, or when providing special education services to other students. These well-needed breaks are used to plan, complete necessary paperwork, or simply catch a breath. If a teacher is consistently sacrificing his/her planning or lunch time, they may feel unsupported or undervalued, leading to higher rates of burnout. In circumstances when a student needs to leave the general education setting, have other arrangements in place to protect the special educator's required planning time.

Behavior Expectations Outside the Classroom

Sometimes behaviors occur outside the classroom, such as in hallways, lunchrooms, or recess. In the beginning, we read about a principal not feeling confident or knowing what the teacher wanted from him when a student was running through the hallway. This is an example of how expectations for students with disabilities should be similar to the rules and expectations for their peers without disabilities. School rules are there for student safety and to promote how to live in a civilized society; these same sentiments should be in place for all students. Our goal is to get students ready for post-school life (i.e., jobs, college, vocational school), and to do this they have to have behavioral expectations that are consistent. Figure 4 shows examples of some do's and don'ts for managing behaviors outside the classroom that administrators could follow to help promote age-appropriate behaviors from students with disabilities.

Figure 4

Do's and Don'ts of Behavior Expectations for Students with Disabilities

Do's and Don'ts of Behavior Expectations for Students with Disabilities	
Do's	**Don'ts**
Do encourage age-appropriate hallway behavior by enforcing school rules and providing praise to students when following rules.	Don't ignore or encourage inappropriate behavior (laugh at behavior that is not age-appropriate).
Do prevent students from proceeding further when running down the hallway.	Don't move to the side and assume the student does not know better.
Do ask how you can help in moments of behavioral support.	Don't assume the teacher is okay and leave the situation without checking.

Basic Expectations for Special Educators

The majority of this resource provides guidance on how to support special education teachers and their students. It is also important to be aware of things to look for in a special education classroom to ensure that the teacher is providing high quality instruction to the students in the room. The Autism and Low Incidence Classroom Observation Tool (ALCOT), provides "key features of effective educational programs for students with disabilities" (Pennington, 2018). Figure 5 outlines some of the components of this tool as a reference to what should be happening in a special education classroom. By knowing these, administrators can provide more specific feedback and praise to the teacher, as well as determine areas in need of professional development. This also allows the administrator to better understand what a special education classroom should look like so it can be compared to what is being seen by their teachers. Furthermore, this will help administrators with knowing what to expect from teachers who are special educators and to identify effective teachers from non-effective teachers, which will better serve this population of students.

Figure 5

Example ALCOT Observation Tool Indicators for a Special Education Classroom

ALCOT Special Education Classroom Indicators for Administrators	
Staff can observe all areas of the classroom	No student sits for more than 5 minutes without instruction
All staff are engaged in instructional activities when not on a break	All instructional materials are age-appropriate
Staff teach academic skills aligned to the general education curriculum	All students have a functional communication system
Staff teach and arrange the environment to facilitate peer interaction	Staff-student interactions promote dignity

Note. Examples from the ALCOT.

Lastly, Figure 6 shows a list of websites and resources that can be accessed by

administrators to gain more knowledge and confidence when working with special education

teachers and students.

Figure 6

Resources for Principals

Additional Resources for Administrators		
Website	**Contents**	**Link**
IRIS	Contains modules related to administration and special education	https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/
CEEDAR Center	Contains articles related to evidence-based practices for special education	https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/
ALCOT	Provides the ALCOT observation tool for a special education classroom	https://www.attainmentcompany.com/alcot-autism-and-low-incidence-classroom-observation-tool

In conclusion, teacher attrition is a nationwide issue and special educators are quitting

their jobs at an even higher rate than general educators. As an administrator, an impactful way to

prevent this issue within your school is by increasing your knowledge in special education and collaborating regularly with the teachers. This includes being familiar with special education lingo in order to participate in IEP meetings, being aware of students' individual communication styles to build relationships, and being knowledgeable in student's behavioral needs while enforcing clear expectations. Additionally, using the provided resources to guide your special educator observations will build your confidence in decision-making and/or feedback to better support your teachers and foster relationships with special educators.

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