

CASE IN POINT:

The Administrative Predicament of Special Education Funding

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Special education administrators face a perplexing, and generally frustrating, existence when dealing with the area of funding. Unlike any other administrative colleague in a school district, the special education administrator often finds him- or herself in a predicament that looks (and feels) like this: parents, staff, and general education ask "will you pay for this?" while the business office, the cabinet, and the school board ask: "why does this cost so much?" The many complexities of special education funding do not help when trying to explain to any of these constituencies why the costs for special education continue to rise, and/or why the funds are limited or absent. When examining this experience, attitudes and realities impacting the administrator's ability to address the problem become apparent.

In an era of school reform that directs efforts for "all" children, the perpetuation of a dual system continues to haunt special education administrators. Even in school systems where integrative service delivery and collaboration are accepted practice, funding issues still create stressors for principals and central office staff. Situations that create fiscal stress are evidenced in any school building or district. These include: increased identification rates, increased severity of disabling conditions, necessary expansion of staff, limited instructional budgets in both general and special education, facilities crises, and the on-going need for professional development of all staff (e.g., administrative, general, and special education teachers and paraprofessionals). While our general education colleagues support special education programs, they look to special education to bring the funding support along with our mandates. Additionally, as new programs and opportunities are presented for general education to expand services to "all" children, special education programs and staff may be affected in different ways, including the physical space displacement of special education programs in favor of newer, more popular programs, and the lure of specialist staff to work in these programs.

Special education administrators are well aware of the factors that contribute to the funding crisis for our programs. The control of the flow of dollars extends beyond that of the special education administrator. Funding discussion always begins by explaining the underfunding of special education at the federal level. After explaining our predicament as an underfunded mandate, the rest of the issues are often so unique to the daily experience of special educators, that it is difficult to outline the cacophony of issues with fellow administrators, school board members, families, or community members. Emotions can also enter into the discussion, which makes the discussion even more difficult.

The list of factors contributing to the funding crisis in special education is both familiar and staggering to consider:

1. Funding formulas which are inequitable, disparate, complex, and inadequate
2. Legal costs which are unparalleled in almost any other areas of education
3. Limitations in funds allocated to hire instructional and administrative staff
4. Costs for unending training needs, including research-based instructional methods, improved diagnostic procedures, legal requirements, and more
5. Uncontrolled cost of nonpublic or private placements
6. Specialized technology and training for students and staff
7. The need for discretionary dollars to recruit and retain qualified staff
8. Negotiated salary raises which reflect on budget sheets as increases the costs of the special education program

When considering all of these factors, the situation may seem overwhelming, and often it is. But special education administrators are by nature optimistic and committed to the children, families, staff, and the system. We certainly can be encouraged by current educational practices that hold promise for our troubled situation. These include: the focus on intervention/prevention in general education, the ability to share resources under the Education and Secondary Education

Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the on-going expansion of service delivery models, the focus on research-based practices for students with special needs, and the hope for full funding of IDEA. In fact, the recently released education proposal of President George W. Bush, gives reference to the need for early literacy in order to prevent students from requiring IDEA services and also to the need for increased IDEA funding (Bush, 2001). Special education administrators will watch this proposal closely.

In the mandate to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students, we know that cost is not to be a consideration. The provision of FAPE, however, is not free; and, in fact, is usually very costly in terms of dollars. While the heart of a special education administrator believes that the cost is not the issue when providing services to children, the reality of executing the fiduciary responsibility of our positions shows us that cost is an issue. Every special education administrator must clearly understand the full scope of the complexities of these issues and be prepared to proactively generate solutions as well as carefully watch and react to programs and proposals that offer hope to support special education programs and the students served.

References

Bush, G.W. (2001). No Child Left Behind. Executive Summary. [Online]. Available: <http://www.ed.gov/inits/nclb/index.html>

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