Principals Make a Difference

Recommendations for Strengthening Special Education Teacher Induction

Principals have a significant influence on the well-being of novice teachers. In fact, they can be the decisive factor in a new teacher's commitment to staying in or leaving teaching.

The quality of the relationship with school administrators is as important to novice special education teachers as it is to novice general education teachers. Although special education teachers can benefit from general administrative support, they also may require additional supports that address particular realities they face—such as teaching students across disability groups, in different settings, and often in isolation from their general education colleagues. Principals who understand the stresses faced by novice special education teachers can foster a school culture that better supports them.

Read on to learn how principals are expanding their roles to support novice special education teachers.

Promoting Positive School Culture

School culture affects novice teachers' satisfaction with their jobs and their determination to stay in teaching. Effective principals make induction an integral part of the school culture. General activities that principals can use to promote a positive culture for all novice teachers include:

- Engaging them in orientation sessions that are designed to help them understand the school's policies and procedures.
- Observing them and offering nonthreatening feedback of their teaching.
- Protecting them from difficult situations (e.g., large numbers of challenging students, extensive nonteaching duties, etc.).
- Providing mentors who are capable of meeting new teachers' needs.
- Providing time to plan with colleagues, observe other classrooms, and meet with other new teachers for peer support.
- Providing resources (e.g., curriculum materials, professional development, suitable classroom space, etc.).

Novice special education teachers may require additional administrative support to help them address challenges related to their specific roles and responsibilities. For example, negotiating the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes is one of the most daunting challenges that new special education teachers face. Effective administrators can support these teachers by promoting a schoolwide philosophy of joint responsibility for
Novice special education teachers also can find it difficult to function effectively in the face of excessive and competing responsibilities. They face a variety of challenging tasks unique to their position, including:

- Completing legal requirements and paperwork (e.g., writing Individualized Education Programs).
- Scheduling, organizing, and managing an environment of adults, along with students with disabilities, across multiple grades and subjects.
- Supervising paraprofessionals.

Effective principals assist novice special education teachers with these tasks and enlist the informal and formal help of other teachers. Principals also exercise caution when assigning teacher caseloads (e.g., not placing novice special education teachers with students whom they are unprepared to teach).

Supporting Induction and Mentoring Programs

The principal often acts as the coordinator of mentors in the school and as a liaison with district-level induction coordinators. Principals monitor the mentor-mentee relationships in their schools and make decisions about matching mentors and mentees.

The principal’s role in facilitating and assisting with mentoring can differ substantially when working with a novice special education teacher. For example, off-site personnel may provide mentoring for these novice teachers, especially when there are no other special education teachers in the building. In such cases, principals should ensure that novice special education teachers also have a school-based mentor who provides day-to-day socialization and support for immediate classroom concerns. Novice special education teachers often perceive natural, collegial, and authentic relationships with other teachers in the building as most valuable.

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Learn More. This Brief summarizes select findings from a comprehensive review of the literature:


It is available on the NCIPP website at www.ncipp.org.