New Roles for Principals in Supporting Novice Special Education Teachers

Having a quality relationship with school administrators is important to novice teachers. Principal support influences teachers’ job satisfaction and decisions to remain in teaching.

Although special education teachers can benefit from general administrative support, they also may require additional supports that address the unique obstacles they face—such as teaching students across disability groups, in different settings, and often in isolation from their general education colleagues. Principals who understand these stresses can foster a school culture that better supports their induction.

What can policymakers do to support principals in assuming increased responsibility for special education teacher induction? The first step is to understand the pressures faced by novice special education teachers and the various ways that principals can extend support. This knowledge can help inform future induction policies, professional development opportunities through principal accreditation programs and their ongoing professional development activities, and resources provided to school districts.

This Brief looks at how principals are expanding their roles to address the realities faced by novice special education teachers. Information is organized around common ways that principals provide support to novice teachers.

Expanding the Principal’s Role in 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 non-threatening feedback.
- Protecting them from difficult situations (e.g., large numbers of challenging students and 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.
Novice special education teachers may require additional administrative support to help them address specific roles and responsibilities. For example, negotiating the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes can be a daunting challenge that new special education teachers face. Administrators can support these teachers by promoting a schoolwide philosophy of joint responsibility for all students and ensuring that necessary structures (e.g., discussions about inclusion as part of professional learning communities, sufficient time for collaboration among teachers who work with common students, etc.) are in place to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities.

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 or not licensed to teach).

### Expanding the Principal's Role in Supporting 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 may sometimes 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 novice special education 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 support for immediate classroom concerns.