

Chapter 12

Special Education Leadership and the Implementation of Response to Intervention

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ABSTRACT

Special education administrators provide leadership to guide the identification of learners with exceptionalities and ensure that staff working with special education students delivers instructional best practice. In order to execute these responsibilities, special education administrators must be effective leaders who collaborate with a variety of stakeholder including. Contrary to their general education counterparts, special education administrators must possess a specific body of procedural knowledge to identify low-performing groups of students. These procedures are often referred to Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS). Under IDEA (2004), students with and without disabilities can benefit from the same system of interventions and supports. This intersection has necessitated coordination of RTI models by both general and special education administrators. Special education and general education leaders will be challenged to blend models of leadership to address the high-stakes environment in our K-12 schools.

INTRODUCTION

Many decades ago, Berry (1941) stated that the differences in philosophy and administration between general and special education were only in that the emphasis was placed on students with disabilities. Today, there are more than 20,000 special education administrators practicing in the U.S. who continue to emphasize the importance of programs and services for students with disabilities. Although the difference some 70 years ago was merely between those students with and those student without disabilities,

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special education administrators are now charged with providing equal educational opportunities for *all* students (Boscardin, 2007; Crockett, 2011; Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009).

The practice of special education leadership is primarily responsible for the leadership and administration of programs and services for students with disabilities. Special education administrators provide leadership to guide the identification of learners with exceptionalities and ensure that staff working with special education students delivers instructional best practice. In order to execute these responsibilities, special education administrators must be effective problem-solvers who collaborate with a variety of stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and the community.

Central to the practice of special education leadership is the “finely tuned recognition of and response to individual learning needs” (Crockett, 2011, p. 351). Effective special education administrators juxtapose the needs of all students with the needs of each individual learner. These administrators must navigate policy, ensure the delivery of instructional best practice, and understand the context in which they administer programs and services. Special education administrators ensure that students with disabilities benefit from educational programs in both the general and special education settings. As a result, special education administrators are being held responsible for educational access and accountability not only for students with disabilities but also for students without disabilities.

Crockett (2011) states that although once driven primarily by district-wide compliance, the administration of special education is now focused on delivering effective and responsive instructional models at all district levels. Crockett (2011) continues that the practice of special education administration includes:

(a) setting expectations for recognizing the individual capabilities of students with disabilities, (b) developing personnel who work collaboratively and effectively in responding to students’ unique educational needs and (c) making the organization of schools work more flexibly on their behalf. (p. 359)

Of these three tasks, the process of identifying students with disabilities and the provision of coordinating special and general education programs is likely to be the most difficult challenge for special education administrators in public schools today (Boscardin, 2007; Crockett, 2011; Crockett et al., 2009; McHatton, Gordon, Glenn, & Sue, 2012; Passman, 2008).

Contrary to their general education counterparts, special education administrators must possess a *specific* body of procedural knowledge to identify low-performing groups of students (Crockett et al., 2009; Passman, 2008). Much of this specific knowledge is needed to provide early intervention services for at-risk students and to develop procedures for identifying students who are at-risk of being identified with a disability (Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). These procedures are often referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-tier Systems of Support (MTSS).

BACKGROUND

Response to Intervention is a multi-tiered model of instruction designed to foster academic achievement for *all* students. It is based upon the use of evidence-based interventions and research-based curriculum, which are intended to address unique learning needs. If implemented successfully, RTI can serve as a model to prevent severe academic problems and provide a means to identify students with disabilities (Whitten, Esteves, & Woodrow, 2009).

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