

### **Principal Leadership for Special Services**

As building leaders, principals must meet a variety of leadership responsibilities, including those related to special services. While this may not be the primary background of many principals, it is imperative that each principal educates themselves and builds their leadership capacity in order to fulfill responsibilities as effectively and supportively as possible. As an aspiring principal myself, there are several capacities in which I hope to grow including those outlined by Bateman and Bateman such as “being responsible for the education of all students” and “being familiar with the concept and practice of special education” (2014, p. 4-5), and those outlined by DiPaola and Walther-Thomas including “building and sustaining a culture conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” and ensuring a “safe, efficient, and effective learning environment” (2003, p. 16-17).

As a principal, it's crucial that I build a culture in which each adult believes each child can and will learn. Each child's education must and will be my responsibility. As I think about this undertaking, there are several steps that I would take as a principal to uphold this responsibility when addressing it through the lens of special services. I believe meeting this responsibility starts with fostering a culture that values collaboration and shared responsibility for all students. As DiPaola and Walther-Thomas point out, “the values and supportive actions of principals and general educators, as mediated by overall school culture, influence special educators' sense of collegial support” (2003, p. 9). As a principal, I would create time for general education and special education staff to collaborate, emphasizing my vision of collective responsibility for all students. Whenever appropriate, I would ensure that professional development opportunities included special education staff, and that their voices and

perspectives were integrated into the learning on equal footing with general education staff.

Beyond that, taking a cue from Bateman and Bateman (2014), I would prioritize opportunities that would allow for co-teaching between special education/EL and general education staff. At the end of the day, it is crucial that all staff work together, discuss students, share ideas, and leverage their collective knowledge and experiences (Bateman and Bateman, 2014). It is through these actions that I believe I could build a culture of collective responsibility for all students, thus meeting my responsibility for each child's education.

Next, I would ensure as a principal I stayed apprised of the concepts and practices associated with special education. I chose to reflect on this responsibility in particular because I know it is one in which I need to grow. One of the first steps I would take to do this would be to develop a strong partnership with special services administrators in my district. As Green (2008) emphasizes, this must be a relationship built on communication, trust, and vulnerability. If I am in a position where I do not know the best next step to take, I need to rely on the relationship built with special services leadership. I need to be confident that I can rely on their specialized expertise to help me make the most well-informed decisions possible. That said, I cannot solely rely on special services leadership to fill my gaps in understanding all the time. For that reason, I will absolutely take steps to ensure I stay up to date on special services processes and laws. The principal I interviewed for this course says he does this by reading articles and through professional organizations. I would definitely take that cue to do the same. This is a crucial step to take as an instructional leader because, as Bateman and Bateman highlight, "understanding the [special education] laws will go a long way toward ensuring students with disabilities receive the education they need" (2014, p. 14).

As a principal, I also need to be incredibly mindful of creating the conditions for staff professional growth. Even before thinking of more “formal” professional learning experiences, I believe this starts with providing support and feedback to all special services staff at the same level provided to general education staff. That said, I need to recognize where my specialized knowledge may be limited, and therefore, I would also work to put mentorships in place for special education staff to receive the real time guidance they need day to day (Bateman and Bateman, 2014). When it comes to professional learning days and inservices, I think it is important to recognize when the inservice is appropriate for all staff and when it might be more appropriate to personalize the use of time for special services staff to engage in differentiated learning experiences or to be given time to complete paperwork (Bateman and Bateman, 2014). One of the ways I would go about ensuring these choices are made carefully is by including special services staff on my building leadership team. When consulting that team of staff on the design of professional learning, I could use their ground level insight to determine the most appropriate use of special services staff time.

Lastly, as a principal, I need to be responsible for creating a safe and effective learning environment for all. For all students, this begins with my ability to create the conditions for effective implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies. I would ensure adequate professional development was offered on Tier 1 strategies for all staff, followed up by specialized training as appropriate for Tiers 2 and 3 (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). These proactive measures will set the foundation for a safe and welcoming learning environment for students and staff. Furthermore, as it relates to special education students, it is crucial that I am aware of all aspects related to discipline of special education

students so that, when in a position to make decisions about aspects such as placement, I'm doing so with special education law in mind (Bateman and Bateman, 2014). Again, I would ensure that I kept up to date on law and made sure to collaborate with special education administration as appropriate.

As an aspiring principal, it is incredibly important that I recognize the many responsibilities that I must uphold for the sake of students, families and staff. With that in mind, I promise to take the steps outlined above to ensure I am creating the conditions to meet those responsibilities efficiently and effectively. Through thoughtful planning, strong collaboration, and purposeful instructional leadership, I can be an effective principal for each and every student and staff member in my school.

### References

Bateman, D.F. & Bateman, C.F. (2014). *A principal's guide to special education* (3rd ed.).

Arlington VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2019). *Tiered framework*. Center on

PBIS. <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tiered-framework>

DiPaola, M.F., Walther-Thomas, C. (2003). *Principals and special education: The critical role of*

*school leaders* (COPPSE Document No IB-7). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida,

Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.

Green, J. A. (2008). Collaborating with special education administrators. *Principal*, 12-15.