

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN INVESTIGATION OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' INVOLVEMENT WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES AND BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT

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Understanding the experiences of elementary principals is important due to the rising number of special education students educated in general education classrooms. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' involvement in special education, barriers faced implementing special education, and the types of support needed to implement special education. The purposeful sample consisted of ten elementary school principals in a large mid-Atlantic public school. Principals were interviewed in a one-on-one format using Zoom. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher using an interview guide protocol. Three research questions guided the study: (a) To what extent are elementary principals involved in the special education implementation in their schools, (b) What barriers or challenges do elementary principals experience

while implementing special education, and (c) What support do elementary principals need to supervise special education implementation? Using Nvivo to code and analyze the ten interviews, data were categorized into three areas: principal's special education responsibilities, barriers to effective implementation of special education, principal's need for additional support, and facilitators of effective implementation of special education. Three cross-cutting themes emerged across all three research questions: navigating students with challenging behaviors, student eligibility and placement, and general education teachers' lack of preparedness. The study results can be useful to district leaders as they develop training designed to help current and future principals increase their level of involvement in special education at their schools, improve their decision-making concerning special education, and ultimately improve behavioral and academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

AN INVESTIGATION OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' INVOLVEMENT
WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES AND BARRIERS TO
INVOLVEMENT

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Perry Wright, Jr. Your love and unwavering support has been a constant source of strength. I could not have done this without you. I am forever grateful and humbled by your kindness, love, support, and guidance.

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Section I. Introduction to the Problem

Principals play a critical role in the education of all students, including those with disabilities. However, research shows few school leaders have sufficient knowledge of special education laws, and most are not well-trained or experienced in dealing with this unique student population (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Valesky & Hirth, 1992). While research shows that principals are second only to teachers as the most influential school-level factor in student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004); historically, the impact of principals' special education knowledge, ability to implement special education services and their ability to increase the educational outcomes of students with disabilities has not garnered much attention in the research literature (Billingsley et al., 2014).

According to several researchers (Bays & Crockett, 2007; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003), principals should have a foundational knowledge of special education in their schools. This knowledge is important in ensuring that students with disabilities receive access to positive learning environments and instruction. Principals are expected to provide effective instructional leadership so that all students receive a quality education and demonstrate proficiency on assessments (Bateman & Bateman, 2015). Federal and state education accountability regulations require schools to evaluate the academic performance of elementary and secondary students, including the proficiency of students with disabilities (No Child Left Behind, 2002), which has led to a change in the landscape of educational programs and how principals lead. Schools must follow the laws governing special education (Bateman & Bateman, 2015).

Principals have numerous demands from their school districts, resulting from federal, state, and local policies. They must consider their staff, parents, and students' needs (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Ensuring students with disabilities receive the special education services they are entitled to is one of those demands (Yell et al., 2006). The legal requirements alone are enormous. Yell et al. (2003) aptly stated that “special education is one of the most legislated and litigated areas in United States public school law, and huge amounts of money are spent on due process hearings that arise from parental challenges to schools’ special education programming” (p. 22). Given the legal mandates of special education legislation, principals are vulnerable to non-compliance with special education laws if they are not sufficiently informed or trained on how to intercede in special education-related matters. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) examined research and identified several essential special education knowledge areas that principals need to know: (a) knowledge of federal and state mandates, (b) effective instructional and behavioral practices, and (c) resources available to meet all the needs of students in their buildings.

Principal leadership in the implementation of special education in the schools is very important, yet the higher education programs that provide coursework for the principalship do not adequately prepare them for the reality of dealing with special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Lasky & Karge, 2006). For instance, five years after the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Davis (1980) surveyed 345 principals in Maine to determine what formal special education training they received. He found that over half stated that they had not

taken a single course in special education while about 15% indicated taking one class and 15% took only two classes.

Nearly two decades later, Hirth and Valesky (1990) surveyed 66 universities and found only 27% of regular education administrator endorsements required special education law and that “over 74% of these universities devote 10% or less of class content to special education” (p. 11). Hirth and Valesky (1990) conclude that many principals had little or no knowledge of the legal liability of not implementing Individualized Education Program (IEP) for students with disabilities.

The interpretation of special education laws among principals without special education knowledge can negatively affect school districts (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). “Instead of managing special education programs at the building level, principals with a limited knowledge may avoid or even relinquish their responsibility to others.” (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002, p. 48). Across the United States, there has been continued growth in special education litigation (Karaxha & Zirkel, 2014). The average legal fee for a school system involved in one due process hearing is \$10,512.50 and potential reimbursement to compensate parents for an attorney’s fees averages \$19,241.38 (Pudelski, 2016). Karaxha and Zirkel (2014) found that between 1998 and 2012, there was an increasing upward trend in the number of published cases filed under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and stated that. Parents of special education students continue to seek remedy for the education of their children from the courts.

It is not realistic to expect principals to be experts in special education knowledge, but principals must have a foundational understanding of the educational entitlements for students receiving special education (DiPaola et al., 2004). According to Cobb (2014),

current research indicates that special education faces several pressing issues, including teacher dissatisfaction, teacher attrition, increasing litigation, and if schools are “to enrich the way in which inclusion is supported and practiced, it is necessary to examine more the perspectives and actions that principals need to take on, and supports they need, as special education leaders.” (p. 19).

The purpose of this study was to investigate how elementary principals reported their involvement in the implementation of special education. The study examined elementary principals’ involvement in the implementation of special education, explored the challenges elementary principals reported with special education, and the types of support elementary principals indicated that they need to implement special education effectively. The results can be useful to district leaders as they develop professional development and identify responsibilities designed to help current and future principals increase their involvement in special education programs at their schools and ultimately improve behavioral and academic outcomes for students with disabilities. The findings from this inquiry will also help principals improve their decision-making concerning special education. The problem is that principals lack foundational knowledge of special education laws, and most are not well-trained or experienced in dealing with special education. Without the foundational knowledge, principals assume a responsibility where they may not be prepared. This lack of preparedness limits a principal’s ability to support teachers and monitor the implementation of special education services.

Justification for the Problem

In 1975, Congress approved the EAHCA, also known as Public Law 94-142. With the passage of EAHCA in 1975, all children, regardless of their disability, are granted equal access to public education. The demand for schools to provide increased positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities has increased with each reauthorization of IDEA. Despite this, principal preparation programs continued to lack the needed training to implement special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007). Also, in 2001 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law in 1965, was reauthorized and renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and increased the accountability for the performance of students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004). The key aspects of the NCLB require that students with disabilities fully participate in all mandatory grade-level assessments and that their assessment results be considered when judging a school's level performance (34 CFR 300.160; NCLB, Sec. 1111 [b] [1]).

With the shifts in education policy, accountability for the academic performance of students with disabilities became a priority for principals and schools. The NCLB, along with changes to the IDEA, requires students with disabilities to participate in assessments. The public must be informed on how students with disabilities are performing on state assessments and are making progress (NCLB, Sec.1111(b) (2)(c)(v)(II). The IDEA and NCLB requirements have put a great demand on principals to have the capacity to improve the performance of all their students. Students with disabilities are being instructed inside general education classrooms in greater numbers and are expected to demonstrate proficiency on standardized assessments just like their

non-disabled peers. Because of this, principals need to be knowledgeable about their role and responsibilities for students with disabilities receiving special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, Overturf, 2007). The principal was no longer only a manager and assumed the duties of instructional leader for all students, including those receiving special education services (Lynch, 2012; Valesky & Hirth, 1992). Although principal preparation programs focus on preparing school leaders, the standards that drive licensure do not focus on preparing principals to meet the needs of students receiving special education (Crockett, 2002; DiPaola et al., 2004).

The emphasis on the principal's knowledge of special education has increased in recent decades, given both the numbers of children receiving special education and new accountability demands. During the 1976-1977 school year, 3,694,000 students, ages 6-21, were educated in federally supported programs for students with disabilities receiving special education. In 2016 that number rose to 6,048,882 students (United States Department of Education, 2018). National data indicate that more students with disabilities receiving special education learn alongside their non-disabled peers in regular classrooms. Students receiving special education, ages 6–21, who spent at least 80 percent of their school day attending classes with their non-disabled peers in regular classes increased from 33 percent in 1990–91 to 63.1 percent in 2015–2016 (United States Department of Education, 2018). According to Turnbull and Turnbull (2003), “implementing special education law and programs and services has become increasingly more multifaceted as more students with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers (Davidson & Gooden, 2001).

Principals must know and be able to interpret special education law to comply with the mandates of IDEA. As such, systematic and differentiated professional development for principals is required to enhance their special education knowledge to improve the learning environment for students with disabilities and result in increased positive outcomes for students with disabilities. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) examined research and identified several essential knowledge areas that most principals lack: (a) knowledge of federal and state special education mandates, (b) effective instructional practices for students with disabilities, and (c) resources available to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their buildings. Therefore, school districts need to ascertain the level of special education knowledge among their principals and provide professional development and ongoing support to enable these administrators to understand how to promote practices that generate positive academic and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

The district where this study took place was Salix Public Schools. Salix is a large, diverse district in a metropolitan area in the Mid-Atlantic region. Salix has over 125,000 students enrolled in over 200 schools in suburban, urban, and rural neighborhoods. The number of students who received special education services in Salix during 2019-2020 was 14,478, representing 10.80% of the district's total enrollment (State Department of Education, 2019). Seventy-two, 34.4% of schools, had special education programs with self-contained classes. The state of special education in Salix is at a critical point. Salix faces several challenges adhering to state and federal requirements for IDEA in the following areas: (a) Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate, (b) the number of dispute resolution processes filed, and (c) ensuring positive educational outcomes for

students with disabilities (State Department of Education, State Performance Plan, 2018).

These requirements are described in greater detail in the following sections.

LRE. According to Sec. 300.114 of IDEA, the LRE provisions state that special education students “receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers and those special education students are not removed from regular classes unless, even with supplemental aids and services, education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” The LRE means that special education students must be educated within the same classroom as their non-disabled peers to the fullest extent possible to ensure that a child is receiving a free appropriate and public education (FAPE). For special education students, federal, state, and district laws and policies require that these students receive instruction in the least restrictive environment and that all staff comply with the laws and policies.

In Salix, eleven elementary schools have non-categorical self-contained special education classrooms. These self-contained classrooms, grades K-5 or K-6, are staffed with a special education teacher and paraprofessional with an average of six to ten students. During the 2016-2017 school year, Salix’s Special Education Department concluded that students transitioning from early childhood special education centers to kindergarten could remain in their neighborhood elementary school through focused data analysis and program evaluation efforts. The transition was possible when a school received enhanced supports and services to meet the students’ educational needs (Salix Master Plan, 2018).” Salix initiated the gradual phase-out of the self-contained classrooms for rising kindergarten students. Two to three self-contained sites are chosen per year to begin the phase-out process. Each year, a grade at a self-contained site will be

phased out starting with kindergarten. By the 2021-2022 school year, all rising kindergarten special education students who would have been students referred for a self-contained non-categorical setting will transition to elementary schools. Salix's Special Education department informs all impacted schools in the spring before the new school and provides additional staffing to support schools that may be affected. In addition, the Special Education Department provides a series of paid workshops in the summer for principals, assistant principals, general education, and special education staff to prepare for the impacted kindergarten students. With more special education students receiving special education services in their neighborhood schools, elementary schools must provide special education services to students with more complex academic and behavioral needs in general education classrooms.

Dispute Resolution Processes

Special Education is often the most expensive expenditure for school districts (Romberg, 2011). One of the primary responsibilities of principals is to ensure that all special education students are provided with an appropriate education based on their IEPs and that schools are following the IDEA (Bays & Crockett, 2007; DiPaola et al., 2003). Principals are expected to support and train staff and lead special education in their schools. Research shows that principals do not have the necessary knowledge or training in special education to support special education effectively (Correa & Wagner, 2011). When principals are not aware of what FAPE is for students with disabilities in their schools are at a greater risk for litigation (Ball & Green, 2014). If parents do not agree with information documented on the IEP, IDEA gives the parents the right to formally state disagreement (20 U.S.C. 1415(i)(3)(B)).

Failure to comply can result in loss of federal funding and potential litigation with parents. If a dispute arises between a parent and the school system over some aspect of a student's special education procedures, such as eligibility determination, LRE, or whether the student's program is appropriate, the parents have four options available to dispute special education decisions proposed by schools: Due Process Complaint, Mediation, Resolution, and State Complaints.

Due process complaints. Due process complaints are filed by a parent or a school district and presided over by a hearing officer or an administrative law judge. Due process issues can cover any matter relating to the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or FAPE. Due process hearings are court hearings that require an impartial hearing officer or an administrative law judge to resolve the issue, and due process hearings require testimony from relevant witnesses and experts. The IDEA guarantees the parent or school district the right to file a due process complaint relating to the identification, evaluation, educational placement of a child with a disability, or the provision of FAPE to the child (20 U.S. §300.507). The timeline for filing a due process complaint must occur within two years of when the parent or public agency knew or should have known about the alleged violation (20 U.S. §300.508).

Resolution. The resolution process starts when a school district receives a due process complaint and scheduling of subsequent meetings unless both parties agree to waive the meeting or use the mediation process instead. The resolution meeting is an opportunity for parents and the school to discuss the due process hearing request issues to see if they can resolve them without going to court. Both parties must agree to any resolution. Parents may bring an attorney to the resolution meeting; however, the school's

attorney may not attend unless the parent's attorney is also present. If the parent and the school agree, in writing, to waive the meeting or agree instead to use the mediation process, a resolution meeting may not take place (20 U.S.C. 1415(f)(1)(B)(i); 34 C.F.R. 300.510(a)). If the parent is unwilling to participate in the resolution meeting after making reasonable attempts and documenting, the school may request that the hearing officer dismiss the parent's due process complaint (34 CFR 300.510(b)(4)).

Mediation. Mediation is a voluntary process that can resolve a disagreement between the student with a disability or a student suspected of having a disability's parents and the public agency responsible for the student's education. It is used when there is a significant disagreement that the parties cannot resolve. A parent or public agency can initiate Mediation; however, it must be voluntary for both parties. Mediation does not delay or deny a parent's right to a due process hearing. The role of the mediator is to help people reach an agreement. The mediator is neutral and will not take sides but assists the parties in finding common ground and exploring possible solutions regarding the dispute (Zirkel, 2007). Congress requires Mediation to resolve IDEA disputes as a quicker and more affordable process than a due process hearing. Mediations are less formal and appear to offer increased participation by parents and school districts (Zirkel, 2007). Mediation can occur either before due process is filed or after.

Table 1 illustrates the number of due process complaints filed against Salix from 2015 to 2020 and the outcomes of the due process complaints, which were withdrawn, settled by Resolution, settled by Mediation, and those resolved with or without a hearing. For the 2018-2019 school year, Salix ranked second of seventeen, and in the 2019-2020 school year, Salix was third of seventeen for the number of Due Process complaints filed

in the state. Table 2 illustrates the number of Mediations filed over five years. For the 2018-2019 school year, Salix ranked fourth of seventeen school districts, and for the 2019-2020 school year, Salix ranked fourth out of eighteen districts for the number of Mediation requests in the state. This data indicates that the parents and the district had generally resolved disputes before the conflict proceeded to an actual due process hearing.

Table 1

Outcomes of Due Process Complaints for Salix 2015-2020

Year	Received	Withdrawn	Withdrawn Settled by Resolution	Withdrawn Settled by Mediations	Withdrawn Unspecified	Resolved without Hearing	Full Hearing
15-16	37	37	17	3	17	0	0
16-17	77	70	35	2	33	0	5
17-18	57	54	20	0	34	0	3
18-19	69	62	31	0	31	1	6
19-20	38	2	36	22	1	0	0
Total	278	225	139	27	116	14	14

Notes. Adapted from the State Department of Education, Outcome of Due Process Complaints End of Year Report, School Years 2015-2020.

Table 2

Outcomes of Request for Mediation 2015-2020

Year	Received	Held	Settled	Not settled	Declined, or Insufficient Request	Withdrawn
15-16	33	10	6	4	19	4
16-17	57	17	12	5	32	8
17-18	32	10	7	3	20	2
18-19	31	10	6	4	10	11
19-20	26	10	8	2	13	3
Total	179	57	39	18	94	28

Notes. Adapted from State Department of Education, Outcome of Mediation End of Year Report, School Years 2015-2020

Formal written state complaints. IDEA (2004) offers families the opportunity to file a formal written state complaint. States operate a complaint system that provides for the investigation and issuance of findings regarding violations of the rights of special education students or their parents (34 CFR 300.151, 152). A parent may submit a signed written statement outlining the alleged IDEA violations. Once the parent files the complaint, the states investigate the allegations of non-compliance (34 CFR 300.153). State complaints can be submitted by an individual or organization who is not the child's parent and can be initiated to address any areas of non-compliance.

Upon receiving a formal written complaint, the state education agency (SEA) must investigate and seek additional information from the school district and the petitioner. The timeline for filing is one year from the date of the alleged violation of IDEA, and the timeline for resolving the issue is 60 days from receipt of the complaint (Mueller, 2015). If the SEA identifies a violation of IDEA and finds that the school district demonstrated a failure to provide appropriate services. In that case, the SEA identifies procedures to remedy the denial of such services to resolve the complaint ([34 CFR 300.151(b)] [20 U.S.C. 1221e-3]. In addition, the school district must determine whether a violation related to the implementation of an IEP negatively impacts a student's ability to benefit from the education program. Table 3 details the district's number of state complaints in the last five years.

Table 3*Number of State Complaints Salix Received, 2015-2020*

Year	Received	Rank in State
15-16	43	1
16-17	45	1
17-18	57	1
18-19	65	1
19-20	47	1

Notes. Adapted from State Department of Education, State Complaints Received, Fiscal Years 2015-2020

Principals have the major responsibility to ensure appropriate special education services are provided to students with disabilities as the leader of special education. The responsibility requires having current knowledge of current laws, litigation, student learning needs, and how to support parents' decision-making rights.

Achievement Gaps

According to their 2019 Strategic Plan, Salix has made reducing the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers was a top priority. Yet, as indicated by achievement gaps in nearly all core content areas, the underperformance of students with disabilities remains one of the district's most significant challenges. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the extent of the achievement gap in English Language Arts Literacy (ELA) and Mathematics between elementary students receiving special education services and their non-disabled peers on the Partnerships for Assessments of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The PARCC assessments measure student achievement ELA and Mathematics for grades 3-8 and high school.

Table 4*Salix 2019 English Language Arts/Literacy PARCC Performance*

Grade	All students	Special education	Percentage point gap
	Percent level 4 and level 5	Percent at level 4 and level 5	
3	27.7	5	22.7
4	32.2	5.3	26.9
5	28.7	5	23.7
6	30.2	≤5	25.2
7	36.9	5.5	31.4
8	31.6	≤5	26.5

Source: State School Report Card**Table 5***Salix 2019 Mathematics PARCC Performance*

Grade	All students	Special education	Percentage point gap
	Percent level 4 and level 5	Percent at level 4 and level 5	
3	26.2	6	20.7
4	21.2	≤5	16.2
5	18	≤5	13
6	14.3	≤5	9.3
7	13.8	≤5	8.3
8	7.1	≤5	2.1

Source: State School Report Card

Graduation Rates. Salix has not met the state targets for students with IEPs graduating with a regular diploma. The four-year 2018 graduation rate for students with disabilities was 66.32%, which declined from the previous year, 71.85%. Salix's results did not meet the state target of greater than or equal to 70.38%. Salix had to submit an

Improvement Plan to identify the root causes and evidence-based practices to improve student results. The four-year general education cohort graduation rate was 79.95%. (Salix Annual Data on SPP/APR Part B Indicators State Report Card, 2020). Students with disabilities continue to graduate with a much lower frequency than general education.

Summary

While there are admittedly myriad complexities associated with implementing special education programs and services in schools, the data presented above demonstrates that Salix faces several important challenges related to special education. Research suggests that principals can play a key role in helping their schools meet state and federal legal requirements and improve outcomes for students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007); DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

The following sections will provide a review of the literature on the role of the principal in special education, principals' preparedness to lead special education, and their knowledge of the IDEA principles. These data provide an understanding of special education law and how the legislation impacts principals. The review provides an overview of the legal foundations of educating students with disabilities and explores the core principles of the IDEA. Additionally, the section provides an examination of the literature around principals' level of knowledge of special education, their attitudes toward students with disabilities, their role in improving special education services, and appropriate levels of principal preparation and certification. The section concludes with a description of initiatives developed by Salix to increase the knowledge and competence

of principals and help them become more effective leaders of special education programs and services in their schools.

Review of Literature

According to DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003), the principal's role is central to affecting changes in special education; however, few school leaders are prepared for this responsibility. This section examines special education law and the impact of state and federal legislation on principals and schools.

Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Public Law 94-142, was signed into law by President Ford in 1975 and set new requirements for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This civil rights law ensures the individual rights of students with disabilities to receive an appropriate education in public schools (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. 300.1). Under this law, no student with a documented disability can be denied the right to access public schools. The purpose of the law is to:

Ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living; to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected; to assist states, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and to assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C § 1400(d))

Before EAHCA, students with cognitive or physical disabilities did not have access to public schools; according to the Department of Education (DOE) (2001), only one out of five students with disabilities attended public school. Once EAHCA was established, schools were required to provide nondiscriminatory testing, evaluation, and placement procedures for students with disabilities. Additionally, the law required that students with disabilities be educated in the LRE. EAHCA also mandated certain due process requirements that included parental involvement in decisions regarding the appropriate education program for their child (Yell et al., 1998). However, the centerpiece of EAHCA was the creation of the process known as an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP required individual planning and programming to meet the needs of each student (Yell et al., 1998).

IDEA of 1990. In 1990, EAHCA was revised, reauthorized, and renamed the IDEA of 1990. The 1990 reauthorization provided the opportunity for mediation between schools and parents before filing a due process hearing (20 U.S.C. § 1415). The regulations also required schools to use person-first language when referring to a student with disabilities, and autism and traumatic brain injury-related disabilities were separated into distinct classifications (Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). In addition, IDEA mandated that the IEP contain a transition plan for students once they reach age 16 (Yell et al., 1998).

IDEA of 1997. In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized. The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA focused on improving educational performance and success in schools (Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). IDEA 1997 provided students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum and the special education curriculum (Sumbera et al., 2014;

Yell et al., 1998). Under IDEA 1997, students receiving special education services are entitled to access instruction at neighborhood schools. Students could attend a school under a principal's leadership who may or may not be trained in special education to ensure special education services are implemented according to students' IEP (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lasky & Karge, 2006).

The reauthorization of 1997 provided some important changes. The reauthorization:

- strengthened the role of parents, ensuring access to the general education curriculum,
- expanded core IEP team members to include both general and special education teachers,
- included students with disabilities in state and district-wide assessments of student progress
- required a statement in IEPs regarding student's participation in assessments and any modifications to the assessment needed to allow participation,
- emphasized student progress toward meaningful educational goals through changes in the IEP process,
- encouraged parents and educators to resolve differences by using mediation, and
- allowed school officials greater leeway in disciplining students with disabilities by altering aspects of IDEA procedural safeguards. (Yell, 2006, p.103)

The most significant change in the 1997 legislation was the additional provisions that addressed behavior and the discipline of students with disabilities. The regulations affected the way principals and staff interacted with students with disabilities. Under the new legislation, students with disabilities could not be disciplined the same way general education students were disciplined until determined whether a particular behavior was a manifestation of the disability (Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). Although it recognized that a safe school climate for all students is essential, the regulations held that if a student's conduct was a manifestation of their disability, the school had to address the behavior in a manner that accommodated the disability yet maintained the safety of all students (Sumbera et al., 2014). If an IEP team determined that a student's behavior was a manifestation of the disability, the student could still face disciplinary action; however, educational services must always be provided, even if the student was out of school or homebound (Sumbera et al., 2014). The schools are charged with developing a student's IEP to address behavior challenges and set forth strategies managing behavior and academic accommodation to maximize student achievement.

IDEA of 2004. The IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 and required schools to provide FAPE with all accommodations and modifications necessary regardless of cost (McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014). According to Pazey and Cole (2012), this mandate has proven significant because only about 16% of the federal education budget meets the obligations of these new special education regulations instead of the 40% promised at the time IDEA 2004 was passed. As a result, schools must meet the new special education regulations without the necessary resources to accomplish all required to support students receiving special education. IDEA 2004 also changed

requirements for participation in meetings to develop a student's IEP, stating that some IEP team members are not required to be physically present at the IEP meeting.

(McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Core Provisions of IDEA and What Principals Need to Know

The IDEA has several core provisions that center on providing educational opportunities, maintaining student access to public schools, and ensuring the rights of all eligible students with disabilities (EAHCA, 1975; IDEA, 2004). The core provisions of IDEA often cited in the literature include the following:

- zero reject
- nondiscriminatory evaluation,
- individualized and appropriate education,
- least restrictive environment,
- procedural due process, and
- parent and student participation (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004; Turnball et al., 2007).

Table 6 presents the core principles of the IDEA, and the required actions school districts must follow.

Table 6*Core Principles of the Individual with Disabilities Act*

Principle	District requirement
Zero Reject	Stipulates that all students have the right to a public-school education and cannot be excluded because of a disability.
Non-discriminatory Evaluation	States that the evaluation for a suspected disability must be non-discriminatory.
Free Appropriate Public Education and the IEP	Requires that every child with a disability, who is eligible for special education, receive educational services at no cost to the parent, and states that the services must be appropriate to a student's individual and unique needs, as documented in an IEP. Requires that schools provide all students who receive special education services with a written Individualized Education Program (IEP) document that outlines how staff will provide the services and specifies that the school will offer the programming at the public's expense.
Least Restrictive Environment	Indicates that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled.
Procedural Safeguards	Identifies the procedures and processes which schools follow when it comes to students with disabilities who require special education or are being evaluated for special education.
Parent Participation	States that parents have the right to equal participation in the special education process. Further states that parents retain the right to refuse further evaluation of their child, and both students and parents must be invited to IEP meetings. IDEA explicitly establishes a role for the parent as equal participant and decision-maker.

Note. Adapted from Free Appropriate Public Education: The Law and Children with Disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2007)

As Bateman and Bateman (2001) and Yell (2006) explained, knowledge of these core provisions is important for principals to ensure compliance with the legal

entitlements for students with disabilities. When principals can demonstrate their understandings of special education, they are better equipped to implement special education programming and service provision in their school in a manner that protects the rights of students with disabilities (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). Billingsley et al. (2014) agreed that principals must be knowledgeable about the law for the effective implementation of special education services.

To support teachers more effectively, principals require the knowledge and understanding to implement the core principles. They need to understand the requirements to identify key strategies designed to assist teachers and other staff with the challenges they may face when serving students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007). For example, Causton and Theoharis (2014) explained that, in most schools, the principal oversees the allocation of special education resources and ensures that eligible students receive the services outlined in the IEP. The principal must also provide sufficient attention to timelines and the procedures for developing IEP decision-making (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). However, McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) found that many principals delegate this responsibility to other staff, which can be a liability to the district. When principals delegate, they surrender their leadership duties. Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer (1997) contend, “Principals have multiple responsibilities and must delegate some duties to others. However, principals surrender their leadership function when they delegate to others. For special education programs to be successful, principals must believe in the significance of their involvement and take responsibility for the outcomes (p. 135). As Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer (1997) asserted, knowledgeable principals who delegate take personal responsibility to ensure that their schools' special education

processes comply with legal mandates. A principal can delegate to another administrator if the principal has the knowledge and skills required and understand that the IEP team's primary job is to plan special education and related services that will provide meaningful educational benefit (Yell, 2006). When principals delegate to others, not holding themselves accountable for the knowledge, they are not engaged in creating special educations in their school that benefit all students (Seger, 2020). Failure to do so may result in adverse outcomes for students and potential litigation. Principals might delegate special education duties because they lack knowledge of special education services (Sisson, 2000).

Zero Reject. All students with a disability have the right to a publicly funded education and cannot be excluded due to their disability. This principle mandates that no child eligible for special education may be prohibited from receiving a FAPE, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability (IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2006). The zero reject principle provides provisions for school districts to establish procedures to identify and deliver specialized services for children birth through twenty-one years old. The zero reject principle requires every state to develop Child Find procedures to “identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities residing in their respective jurisdiction, including homeless children, wards of the state, and children attending private schools, regardless of the severity of the disabilities” (20 U.S.C. Section 1412(a)(3)). School districts are obligated to notify the public as a means of locating children with disabilities.

In 2007, schools started developing Response to Intervention (RtI) teams in response to IDEA 2004 (Pazey & Cole, 2012). RtI created the opportunity for early

intervention services to address learning concerns and earlier detection of disabilities (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Instructional modifications and accommodations could be initiated within the general education curriculum. By doing so, educators could obtain supporting data to track possible disabilities before the formal referral to special education. As a result, more individuals with disabilities began receiving services earlier (Pazey & Cole, 2012; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014).

The IDEA and NCLB focus on accountability and improved outcomes for students with disabilities. As DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) explained, understanding these two laws is necessary for principals to provide leadership for special education in schools. Principals must be aware that students who present with behavioral challenges cannot be removed or excluded from public education indefinitely. The IDEA states that school districts cannot terminate the educational program of a student with a disability, who has been disciplined through exclusionary measures for more than ten school days, even in the event of a violation of the rules surrounding guns, drugs, and serious bodily injury (Turnbull, 2009). The IDEA 2004 “prohibits the exclusion, allows for discipline, addresses the disparate impact of exclusion on students with disabilities, and thereby carries out the zero reject principle” (Turnbull et al., 2007, p. 86).

An essential provision of zero reject centers on the exclusion of a student based on their disability and disciplinary procedures that are in place. Students are not excluded from receiving FAPE even if suspended (Decker & Pazey, 2017). Specifically, IDEA states:

Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by providing incentives

for whole-school approaches, scientifically based early reading programs, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and early intervening services to reduce the need to label children as disabled in order to address the learning and behavioral needs of such children. (20 U.S.C. § 1401(c)(5)(F))

This principle seeks to ensure that eligible students receive access to special education. At the same time, it ensures that students whose learning or behavior problems are due to other factors, such as inadequate instruction, language, or culture, do not receive access to special education. Changes made to IDEA 2004 established new requirements for determining a specific learning disability. These requirements also have implications for the screening and the pre-referral initiatives to support struggling students without inappropriate identification. RtI is specified in IDEA 2004 as one such strategy. Essential provisions of the zero reject principle focus on the exclusion of students based on their disability and disciplinary procedures that are in place.

Nondiscriminatory evaluation. The IDEA states that when parents or school staff suspect that a child may have a disability, the child can be referred for an initial evaluation. The law requires that the evaluations be conducted within very specific timelines. Parents must provide written consent for this evaluation, addressing all areas of concern identified in the referral. The assessment must be completed by individuals qualified to administer and interpret the results. Principals need to be aware of the evaluation procedures, the mandated timelines, and the requirements to ensure that the process is non-discriminatory and provides a comprehensive perspective of the student, including examinations of their academic, functional, social, and behavioral levels (Turnbull et al., 2007). The nondiscriminatory evaluation principle mandates that each

student receives a fair, culturally, and linguistically unbiased evaluation to determine whether the student is eligible for special education (Yell, 2006). Several court decisions led to creating changes in legislation for students being evaluated for special education eligibility (Turnbull et al., 2007; Yell, 2006). The IDEA states that when parents or school staff suspect that a child may have a disability, they can refer the child for an initial evaluation.

The IDEA 2004 “addresses both the techniques for classification and the action founded on the classification, which require both procedural safeguards and substantive protection” (Turnbull et al., 2007, p. 120). Additionally, the legislation states that schools need to administer assessments in a child’s native language. Students' eligibility for special education can be affected by their limited English proficiency status (34 CFR § 300.304). Students are determined eligible for special education under one or more of the 14 IDEA disability categories: Specific Learning Disability, Blindness, Deafness, Other Health Impaired, Autism, Intellectual Disability, Orthopedic Impairment, Multiple Disabilities, Hearing Impairment, Emotional Disturbance, Visual Impairment, Speech and Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Developmental Delay (20 U.S.C. 1401 (3) (A) (i-ii)).

As Turnbull et al. (2007) explained, there must be a causal relationship between the service, classification, and student needs. Principals need to be aware of students’ disabilities to support staff who work with these students and ensure that special education services are implemented according to each student’s identified needs (Fuchs et al., 2010; McHatton et al., 2010).

FAPE and the IEP. The IDEA ensures that every student receiving special education receives an individualized FAPE through an IEP (Yell, 2006). IDEA 2004 defined FAPE as follows:

[Special] education and related services that (a) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) meet standards of the State educational agency; (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and (d) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required. (20 U.S.C. 1401(602)(9)(A-D))

According to the DOE, the IEP is the cornerstone of the IDEA. It must include specific information about the student and the educational program designed to meet a student's unique needs (DOE, n.d.). According to Bateman and Bateman (2014), "The individualized education program (IEP) is the most important document that exists for a student with a disability" (p. 64). An IEP is a written legal agreement between the school district and the student's parents or guardians. Special education programs must benefit students to ensure that every student with a disability receives an individualized free appropriate and public education. To make sure each student benefits from special education and related services, IEP teams must "ensure that programs are (a) based on student needs, (b) meaningful and contain measurable annual goals, (c) grounded in scientifically based practices, and (d) measured on an ongoing basis to ensure that students make progress" (Yell, 2006, p. 243). The main components of the IEP are as follows:

- a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including how the child's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum;
- a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals;
- a description of how the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals will be measured, and when periodic progress reports will be provided;
- a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child;
- a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals; to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum and to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and to be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children;
- an explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class and extracurricular and nonacademic activities;
- a statement of any individual accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on state and districtwide assessments; and

- the projected date for the beginning of the services and modifications, and the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications. (Center for Parent Information and Resource, n.d.)

The IEP defines the specially designed instruction and related services that a student with a disability requires to meet specific academic, functional, social, and emotional goals. Congress requires that schools develop an IEP for all students served under the IDEA (Yell, 2006).

The IEP is so critical that failure to implement it appropriately may cause a student's special education program to be invalid (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). For this reason, principals must understand the decision-making process for IEP development. McLaughlin and Ruedel (2012) also stressed that principals must ensure school staff has the time and resources to adhere to IEP processes before, during, and after IEP meetings. All appropriate staff needs to be aware of their responsibilities in implementing the IEP.

To support the IEP process, support teachers, and communicate with parents, principals need to know about the available resources to meet the needs of students with varying disabilities. Knowing what resources are available helps guarantee principals have knowledgeable educators around them to ensure that their school is compliant (Billingsley et al., 2014). Principals must also work with staff to ensure students receive services in the least restrictive environment identified on the IEP (McHatton et al., 2010). McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) noted that there are three main reasons why principals need to understand the decision-making process for IEP development: to understand the importance of the IEP, the relationship to day-to-day instruction for students with

disabilities, and ensuring that students with disabilities have access to specially designed, high-quality education, including the services and supports determined by the IEP team.

McElhinny and Pellegrin (2014) further explained principals' responsibility for the implementation of students' IEPs. The authors stated that principals who fail to exercise appropriate leadership in these matters could experience negative career consequences. For example, they cited the *Kay Williams v. Cabell County Board of Education* (1996) court case, which resulted in the school district removing a principal for "violations of two students' IEPs for confidentiality violations and failure to

- Take responsibility and administrative leadership;
- Ensure teachers implemented the IEP; and
- Cooperate with parents" (McElhinny and Pellegrin, 2014, p. 2).

Zirkel (2015) further highlighted the principal's responsibility to ensure that all staff understand their roles and responsibilities under the IDEA and guarantee that a FAPE is provided to all students receiving special education.

LRE. The IDEA requires that students with disabilities receive instruction in the LRE with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. The term LRE refers to placing a student with disabilities in an environment that meets the instructional needs of the student while providing the student the maximum opportunity to be with non-disabled peers and have access to the general curriculum (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2006). The law requires IEP teams to consider the general education classroom, when appropriate, as the LRE for each student. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2004) argued that principals must understand that the discussion about service delivery should always begin with instruction inside general education classrooms. The IEP team

only considers other special education environments when the child's needs warrant more specialized services. As mandated in the IDEA, the IEP team must document any placement outside the general education classroom, including regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, instruction in hospitals and institutions. If a child requires services outside of the general education setting, the IEP team must evaluate all available data on the child's progress and indicate in the IEP document why the student will receive services outside of that setting (34 C.F.R. §300.115).

Principals provide general and special education teachers with professional development and other support to educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms. According to Praisner (2003), the perceptions and behaviors exhibited by the principal can strongly influence placement decisions that an IEP team makes for each student. Praisner noted, "A principal's support is necessary for the successful implementation of inclusion... principals with more positive attitudes toward inclusion were more likely to believe that less restrictive placements were most appropriate for students with disabilities" (p.141). Bateman and Bateman (2014) also explained that the increasing support for more inclusive classrooms in the IDEA requires general education teachers to adapt to different learning styles and develop classroom accommodations and modifications, often before a student is even evaluated for special education services (p. 6).

Procedural safeguards. The procedural safeguards included in the IDEA are designed to (a) protect the educational rights of students with disabilities and protect the rights of their parents and (b) provide formal structures that foster positive communication between the school and parent throughout the special education process.

These safeguards identify the procedures and processes schools will follow regarding students with disabilities who require special education or are being evaluated for special education. The parents of students with disabilities receive documentation that includes a full explanation of the IDEA procedural safeguards. These safeguards protect a student's right to a FAPE by guaranteeing that parents are meaningfully involved in developing their child's IEP. These safeguards include (a) notice and consent requirements, (b) opportunity to examine records, (c) procedures to protect the rights of students when a parent is not available, (d) the right to an independent educational evaluation at public expense, (e) voluntary mediation, and (f) due process hearings (934 C.F.R. §300.500-515; Yell, 2006; Yell et al., 2011).

One of the most critical requirements of the IDEA is that parents receive notice of, and an opportunity to participate in, the development of their child's IEP (34 C.F.R. § 300.322; 34 C.F.R. § 300.504). Parents must receive notification of all school decisions related to their child's special education program. The notification must occur before the school's plan to initiate changes so that the parent can be involved in the process (Yell, 2006). Yell et al. (2011) explained the following:

When there is a disagreement between the parents and the school on any proposed decisions to start or change the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or the provision of FAPE to the child, or if the school refuses to initiate or modify any of these areas, parents may initiate an impartial due process hearing. (p. 68-69)

School discipline is a critical procedural safeguard that directly involves principals. The IDEA contains specific considerations and procedures regarding the

discipline of students suspected of having a disability and those receiving special education services, particularly if the disciplinary action involves removing a student from current educational environments without due process (Turnbull et al., 2007; Yell, 2006). Like all students, children receiving special education services can be suspended or expelled for violating a district's code of conduct (34 C.F.R. §300.530(b)(1)). However, the IDEA has procedures that schools must follow when suspending students with disabilities for more than ten days (34 C.F.R. §300.530(b)(2)). These procedures are designed to prevent schools from suspending or expelling students without considering the effects of the child's disability (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). Principals are instrumental in creating safe and orderly environments that students can learn while also ensuring the school is not violating any student's IDEA rights when implementing discipline procedures and identifying behavioral supports (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012).

Parent participation. Parents are required IEP team members in the special education process. As a result, IEP teams must make collaborative team decisions in partnership with parents. There are necessary documents that require written parental consent for an IEP team to move forward, such as evaluating a student and consenting for special education services. Parent participation is vital to meet the IDEA's requirement that parents are full and equitable participants in the IEP process. Schools are not allowed to deny or abbreviate parent participation. The IDEA has parameters to support parents with meaningful and fair participation in the special education decision-making process (Turnbull et al., 2007). The IDEA's provisions ensure full and equal participation to include: (a) providing adequate written notice of IEP team decisions, (b) scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed upon time and place, (c) informing the parents of the

purpose, time, and location of the meeting and indicating who will attend, and (d) informing the parents of their right to bring others of their choice to the meeting (34 C.F.R. §300.322). These provisions help guarantee IEP teams involve parents for collaborative IEP team decisions. Parents must receive written notices of all meetings, and schools must make documented efforts to include the parents in the special education process.

Principals as an IEP team member. The Local Educational Agency (LEA) representative is an essential and required team member of each student's IEP Team. The IDEA identifies the LEA representative as someone who

- (i) is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities;
 - (ii) is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and
 - (iii) is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency.
- (34 CFR 300.321(a)(4))

Principals, assistant principals, or other administrators in the district can serve as the LEA. As the LEA, principals need to be knowledgeable of the IEP and the services recommended. As a member of the IEP team, the LEA works collaboratively with other IEP team members to develop an IEP based on each student's unique needs reasonably calculated to enable the student to make meaningful progress. It is the principal responsibility to hold the IEP team members accountable for providing services. If principals have limited or no knowledge of special education, it will be a barrier for a principal to hold a person accountable. If they lack the knowledge or skill to know when students are not receiving services outlined on the IEP, the principal may be unable to

provide guidance because they will not be able to hold staff accountable. Crocket, Billingsley, and Boscardin (2018) state that school leaders are held accountable for student learning and it is important to consider how to provide leadership that will improve student outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities (p.5).

The special education process starts with an IEP meeting where a team develops individualized supports and services for a student. A principal who attends and is engaged in the IEP team meetings can be key in successfully implementing the support students must receive. Unfortunately, due to a lack of training and limited knowledge, many principals are not prepared for their role in special education, and their gaps in knowledge hinder them from facilitating an IEP meeting. Literature supports the notion that principals' lack of preparation or training can adversely affect special education students (Frost & Kersten, 2011; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, Terry, & Farmer, 2010).

Level of Principal Knowledge of Special Education

Knowledge of the major principles of the IDEA provides the foundation for the foundational knowledge principals should have to supervise special education programs more effectively in schools. For example, Jesteadt (2012) surveyed 176 Florida school leaders on their knowledge of the six principles of the IDEA. Jesteadt developed a survey to address the core principles of IDEA in the areas of zero reject, nondiscriminatory testing, appropriate education, LRE, due process, parent participation, and how the principals acquired their special education knowledge. The survey contained items requesting demographic and background information and 12 hypothetical scenarios based on the core principles of the IDEA. The researcher sent the survey to every public-school principal across Florida (Jesteadt, 2012).

The survey results indicated that the principals did not appear to have sufficient special education knowledge (Jesteadt, 2012). The percent of correct answers for the principles surveyed were: zero reject 50%; nondiscriminatory evaluation policy 55%; the LRE policy 52%; the FAPE policy 41%; the due process policy 40%; and the parent participation policy 53%. Participants' average correct response rate was 48%. These findings suggest that principals' knowledge was weakest in the areas of FAPE and due process. Jesteadt also reported a positive correlation between principals' knowledge of special education and the amount of formal education and training they received. Jesteadt concluded that a significant gap existed between principals' training and readiness to handle special education issues.

Principals' Attitudes Toward Students with Disabilities

Researchers have linked principals' positive special education experiences and special education knowledge to principals' beliefs about special education services for students with disabilities in their schools (Praisner, 2003; Wakeman et al., 2006). One of the earliest studies on principals' attitudes toward inclusion was conducted by Praisner (2003), who examined principals' perceptions of the least restrictive placement for students with mild and moderate disabilities. Praisner developed a scale, *The Principals Inclusion Survey*, to investigate relationships between attitudes toward inclusion and variables like training, experience, and special education placements perceptions. Through this survey, Praisner (2003) examined the relationship between attitudes toward inclusion and special education placements, specifically exploring the following variables: (a) experience; (b) the types of topics related to special education and inclusion that principals explored in preparation programs; (c) the number of relevant topics

covered in the principals' formal training; (d) in-service hours; (e) special education credits; (f) age; (g) years teaching in general and special education; (h) years as a principal; (i) gender; (j) special education certification; (k) crisis plan; (l) personal experience with individuals with disabilities; and (m) vision statement.

Praisner (2003) surveyed 408 Pennsylvania elementary principals and found that while 21.1% of the principals were positive about inclusion, the Attitude Scores for 76.6% of the participants were within the "uncertain" range. The higher their Experience Score, the more positive the principals' experience across all categories. Praisner also revealed an association between principals' personal experience interacting with individuals with disabilities outside of school and demonstrating a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Additionally, the data showed a significant relationship between the number of each principal's college credits and in-services hours and their Attitude Score. The more training and courses taken in special education; the more favorable the principals' attitudes were toward ensuring that students with disabilities participated in general education classes.

Broadly, Praisner (2003) concluded that principals were more likely to accept special education students in general education if they had knowledge of disabilities and instructional practices for students with disabilities. However, Praisner found no significant relationship between principals' attitudes and years of experience in regular special education or elementary administration. The author also reported that the principals' actual experiences with students with disabilities and not the number of experiences is connected to the principals' attitudes toward students receiving services inside general education (Praisner, 2003).

Praisner (2003) also found that the perceptions and behaviors exhibited by the principal can strongly influence the placement decisions that an IEP team makes for each student. Praisner noted, “A principal’s support is necessary for the successful implementation of inclusion... principals with more positive attitudes toward inclusion were more likely to believe that less restrictive placements were most appropriate for students with disabilities” (p.141).

While Praisner (2003) found that no significant correlation existed between a principal’s attitude and years of experience as an administrator, Wakeman et al. (2006) asserted that the relationship between principals’ special education knowledge and their decision-making beliefs positively affected their ability to (a) reflect on situations and gain knowledge to guide decisions, (b) regularly meet with special education staff, (c) provide resources for effective instructional practices, (d) participate in program decisions, and (e) be a risk-taker with respect to advancing learning but not with regard to legislation. In related work, Ball and Green (2014) examined the perceptions of principals in Tennessee about the notion of students with disabilities receiving instruction inside general education classrooms. The authors administered Praisner’s *Principal and Inclusion Survey* to 138 principals to determine if the experience and training of K-12 principals influenced their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The authors revealed six findings based on the administrators’ responses:

1. School leaders are limited in training and experience related to special education and inclusive practices.

2. The attitudes of school leaders are slightly negative for students with disabilities.
3. School leaders support inclusive placements for students with disabilities; however, there are differences in their perceptions based on the disability category.
4. The more training and experience school leaders have, the more negative their attitudes are about special education.
5. The attitudes of school leaders are not directly related to their perceptions of the most appropriate placements for students with disabilities.
6. The most appropriate placement for students with disabilities can be predicted by the approximate number of students with IEPs included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day.

Ball and Green's (2014) findings were in direct contrast to Praisner's (2003) results, where Praisner found that principals who had positive experiences and exposure to special education students had more positive attitudes toward inclusion. Ball and Green suggested that the principals' negative attitudes might result from their lack of training and experiences versus negative perceptions or attitudes toward inclusion. Additionally, results indicated that the principals had slightly negative attitudes toward integrating students into general education. The authors found a negative correlation between the training and experience and attitudes of the principals. Ball and Green indicated that these results spoke to the need for principals to receive more pre-service

training and experience with special education to increase the quality and practice of inclusion in their schools.

Principal's Involvement in Special Education

DeClue (1990) conducted case studies on three elementary principals selected by their districts' special education directors. The principals' interactions with special education conveyed that special education students were valued and important. DeClue found that many principals delegated their decision-making responsibilities for special education to representatives from the central office rather than being directly involved with special education. DeClue (1990) found that principals viewed themselves as competent in organizing, directing, and coordinating special education. However, they lacked knowledge of procedures for student placement, teacher evaluations for special education teachers, and specially designed instruction for students with disabilities. DeClue (1990) indicated that principal preparation programs must include practical examples of problems principals may encounter with special education and that training was essential to developing confidence and special education skills.

Sisson (2000) conducted a study that examined perceptions of the level of involvement and training of elementary principals in special education. Sisson developed a survey instrument that had thirty items. Sisson reported survey results from 102 elementary school principals, 12 special education directors, and 22 university faculty members in Arizona that examined thirty-six special education activities, ideal level of involvement, and types of training needed to best support principals in managing special education programs in their schools. The results indicated that the more special education training principals received led to greater involvement in special education. Principals

reported that they were more involved in special education than was perceived by the special education directors and the university faculty. Special education directors reported that principals need to increase their involvement in special education.

Klofenstine (2002) conducted a study examining the special education involvement of school principals in Georgia. The study surveyed 133 elementary, middle, and high school principals and 96 special education teachers. The findings were that principals rated their level of involvement in special education significantly greater than did the special education teachers who were asked to rate their principals' involvement. The level of principal involvement in special education in the study was not related to special education knowledge. This study asserted that the level of principal involvement in special education was not related to their knowledge of special education.

Durtschi (2005) conducted a quantitative study examining principal involvement in special Education using the *Principals' Involvement in Special Education Survey*. The sample was 566 elementary school principals, 51% of the population of elementary principals in Wisconsin. Principals, who spend considerable time on special education and related issues, encourage collaboration and inclusion. Respondents in Durtschi's (2005) study felt comfortable in the amount of time they spent in special education, felt prepared in special education, felt confident in their abilities, and encouraged collaboration among their general and special education teachers. The data indicated that the special education activities that the principals spent the most time on were attending IEP meetings, behavioral interventions, and supervising special education staff. Durtschi's study found that the Wisconsin elementary principals spent an average of 10.5 hours a week on special education and that the time spent on special education

was not significantly out of proportion with the percentage of students in special education in their schools. Another important finding was that 94% of principals reported they could designate someone else as the LEA representative at IEP meetings and half of all principals reported attending over 75% of all IEPs held in their schools.

Researchers have found that school principals can increase students' achievement by enhancing the quality of instruction provided. For example, McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) argued that principals must serve as vital change agents to increase opportunities for students with disabilities to receive high-quality instruction and access to general education (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). Authors also noted that principals could provide planning time and individualized training supports so that teachers can gain the knowledge and skills necessary to provide high-quality instruction to students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Walther-Thomas, 2003). Despite the body of research that examines the effect of principal leadership on students' achievement, generally, little research addresses the impact of principal leadership on the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Billingsley et al., 2014).

Waldron et al. (2011) examined specific actions that one principal took to improve achievement outcomes for all students by providing high-quality instruction through data-based decision-making. Waldron et al. found that effective special education programs can occur in a typically staffed school. They also concluded the following:

Development does not require unique contributions from outside experts in school change and professional development or excessive resources. What is needed is very efficient use of resources, the use of high-quality professional development

to improve teacher practice, a data system that guides decision-making and determines how resources will be used to maximum effect, and a principal who is willing and sufficiently skilled to provide leadership as the school is redesigned to support and enact the shared vision (Waldron et al., 2011, p. 60).

The data has also shown that principals need knowledge about special education and how to interact positively with their staff to affect positive change in their schools. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013), for example, examined principal leadership in a rural Florida elementary school that was effective in providing general education instruction to students with disabilities. According to the researchers, 18% of the 460 students at the school had identified disabilities. Hoppey and McLeskey found that three key leadership characteristics helped to shape this supportive school environment: (a) caring for and personally investing in teachers, (b) buffering staff from external pressures, and (c) promoting teacher growth. The researchers concluded that principals must display trust in teachers; listen to their ideas, concerns, and problems; and treat staff fairly. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) also noted that the principal did not directly manage all activities in his school but distributed leadership effectively across teachers to accomplish the school vision of improving student performance.

Principal Preparation and Certification

In the United States, individual states determine the licensing and certification requirements that one must meet to become a principal. According to Hackman (2016), The SEAs typically base these qualifications on a specified number of credit hours, focusing on educational leadership courses, completing an approved educational administration preparation program, teacher certification, previous teaching experience,

and passing a state exam. Hackman examined administrative licensure and leadership preparation for school administrators and noted that unlike other fields (e.g., medicine and psychology), licensure options for school administrators are not consistent across the United States. In 2015, 47 states made school experience a prerequisite to becoming a principal, 23 required teaching experience, and 45 required a master's degree (Hackmann, 2016). One of the Race to the Top (RTTT) parameters, the DOE's competitive grant created to reward innovation and reforms in school districts, mandated that applicants develop alternative routes to becoming an administrator outside of attending an institution of higher education. The RTTT was a \$4.35 billion [United States](#) Department of Education competitive grant created to spur and reward innovation and reforms in state and local district K–12 education. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia set nontraditional paths to becoming a principal (Hackmann, 2016).

Because of the varying licensing requirements for individuals who want to become administrators, all licenses are not equal (Hackman, 2016). In 2009, only 35 states required an examination as a prerequisite for licensure. In 2016, 15 required the use of the School Leaders Licensing Assessment (SLLA), which was based on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Hackman, 2016). Additionally, Hackman found that performance on the SLLA has not been useful in predicting how a school's students will perform and should not be a criterion for one's ability to become an effective principal.

Billingsley et al. (2014) found that states did not mandate that principal preparation programs include coursework related to special education services. Lynch (2012) revealed similar findings, concluding that only eight states — Colorado, Iowa, Maine,

Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, and Vermont — had special education requirements for the principal certification. As Praisner (2003) asserted, principal preparation programs often fail to address the need for more training in special education, despite research indicating that having this knowledge influences principals' attitudes and beliefs about students with disabilities.

McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry (2010) surveyed 159 principals and asked how much special education coursework they had completed in special education. The researchers found that only 49% were trained in special education issues, and only 30% had any training on the learning needs of children with special education identification. Despite this lack of formal education for administrators, the McHatton et al. (2010) study reported that principals recognized special education meetings, IEP meetings, special education classroom observations, and special education lesson plan supervision as comprising a large part of each week.

In one southeastern state, Angelle and Bilton (2009) administered a survey to 215 principals to gain insight into the special education issues covered during their principal preparation programs and internships and their comfort in dealing with special education issues in schools. Angelle and Bilton (2009) examined (a) principals' level of readiness upon completing their principal program to deal with special education programs; (b) differences between perceptions of readiness to deal with special education among principals whose programs included internships and those whose programs did not; and (c) if recent graduates of principal preparation programs felt more prepared to confront and support special education than did long-time graduates of principal preparation programs. They found that only 47% had received formal training. Angelle and Bilton

(2009) found no significant difference in the principals' comfort level who completed their program within five years of the study and those who completed their program more than 15 years prior. Additionally, the data revealed that 53% of the principals did not take any courses in special education, 32% had one class, 9% took two classes, and 6% took three classes. The authors also identified a statistically significant relationship between principals' completion of at least one course in special education and their comfort level dealing with special education. Their findings suggest that despite the legislative changes, principal preparation programs in the one state were not preparing principals to be confident or comfortable with special education processes (Angelle & Bilton, 2009).

District Initiatives to Build Capacity of School Administrators

Like other school districts across the nation, some principals in Salix have experienced challenges providing in their schools. In response to this challenge, Salix has developed several initiatives designed to increase the knowledge and competence of the school district's principals and help them be more effective leaders in their buildings.

The Principal Pipeline Initiative. In 2011, Salix received funds from the Wallace Foundation to establish its own "principal pipeline." The grant allowed Salix to define the role of school-based administrators, develop a recruitment and selection process for aspiring administrators, provide training for aspiring administrators, and develop a comprehensive evaluation system. To this end, Salix has employed the principal pipeline initiative (PPI) to build leadership capacity among its population of school administrators. The PPI works with assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators to develop instructional leaders, strategic thinkers, and school designers (Salix Bridge to Excellence Plan, 2014). The PPI includes five components: (a)

defining leadership; (b) providing high-quality pre-service training; (c) utilizing selective hiring; (d) providing effective on the job evaluation and support; and (e) sustaining alignment, capacity, and quality assurance (Salix Bridge to Excellence, 2014). Over the years, Salix utilized its partnerships with the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), New Leaders for New Schools, the Wallace Foundation, School Leaders Network, and other partners to expand its efforts to establish comprehensive and tailored leadership development programs (Salix Bridge to Excellence, 2014). The Department of Special Education has presented information to principals at the systemic principals' meetings and summer leadership meetings. Typically, the presentation can be from 45 minutes to 90 minutes one to two times per year.

Special Education exploratory evaluation. In 2006, Salix's Department of Special Education hired an outside agency to conduct an exploratory evaluation of the special education services in Salix. This formative evaluation occurred because the district received a state-issued action plan due to noncompliance on Annual Report Card on State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Reports (APR) indicators related to the percentage of special education students placed in more restrictive settings. The final exploratory evaluation report was completed in the summer of 2006. It provided recommendations for the district to consider when restructuring the department's support of central office staff and planning future training. The researchers' primary methods of data collection included focus groups and interviews. During the evaluation, researchers interacted with six elementary, middle, and high schools. The resulting report included the following recommendations for the district:

- Encourage principals to make creative school-based solutions for greater

access to LRE and involve special education teachers and parents in the decision-making process.

- Training in recognizing student needs for special education services
- Equip principals to understand and support co-teaching and inclusion
- Ensure that principals have a greater understanding of disabilities and accommodations/modifications
- Increase principals' knowledge of accountability provisions in IDEA and NCLB
- Help principals to understand the tasks and paperwork associated with the IEP process and
- Facilitate principals continued understanding of special education reports/data (Welch et al., 2006).

Many of the recommendations proposed are consistent with other findings of what principals need to know to be more effective leaders of special education programs in their schools (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Praisner, 2003; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006; Wakeman et al., 2006). As a result of the evaluation, the Salix Department of Special Education developed a proposal to address the findings and make education more accessible for students with disabilities in neighborhood schools. The proposal was designed to return all students in education classes to their neighborhood schools. The programs were in designated comprehensive elementary and middle school sites. These programs consisted of self-contained classrooms in which small group non-categorical instruction was provided the entire day by a special education teacher and paraprofessional.

Summary and Purpose of Investigation

The research clarifies that students with disabilities need access to quality instruction, the general education curriculum, and their non-disabled peers (Causton, & Theoharis, 2014). Data show that schools that successfully meet the diverse educational and behavioral needs of students with disabilities do so primarily because of effective principal leadership (McLesky & Waldron, 2015). The literature reviewed in the previous sections outlines the wide range of information that principals need to know and their training to provide better supervision for the special education programs and services at their schools. Principals are the leaders of school buildings and are responsible for identifying and defining staff roles and providing resources for instructional support.

Research indicates that principals require (a) training that is designed to address the realities of providing day-to-day supervision and leadership for special education programs that exists in schools and (b) time to observe models of successful special education service delivery that will lead to increased student outcomes and a school environment where high-quality instruction is available for all students (Praisner, 2003). Davidson and Algozzine (2002) argued that school districts need to be proactive about reducing challenging situations for principals to eliminate a principal's avoidance of relinquishing their responsibilities to others due to limited knowledge. School districts must also ascertain what principals need to know about special education laws and provide appropriate and differentiated professional development since most principal preparation programs do not provide special education content during pre-service training.

Given the extensive challenges faced by Salix in implementing key aspects of special education, the district has to (a) identify new strategies that will help Salix students with disabilities meet academic benchmarks, (b) provide opportunities for students with disabilities to learn through curriculum access inside general education, (c) establish positive school climates for students with challenging behaviors, and (d) engage students with disabilities and their parents through increased collaboration to ensure students are attending and positively engaged in class. The district must develop the knowledge and skills of its principals about how to support special education more effectively.

Therefore, this study examined what elementary principals report about their involvement in special education. Specifically, the study examined (a) elementary principals' reported involvement in special education, (b) elementary principals' challenges with special education, and (c) types of support principals indicated they need to implement special education more effectively in an elementary school. Through one-on-one virtual interviews, the researcher identified how the principals were involved and key concepts or areas that challenged elementary principals as they attempted to implement policies related to educating students with disabilities. District leaders can use the results of this study to develop professional development and accountability measures that can assist current and future principals with increasing their level of special education knowledge and involvement to improve (a) behavioral and academic outcomes for students with disabilities in their schools, (b) LRE percentages for students accessing instruction in general education, and (c) their decision-making concerning special education.

Section II. Methodology

Purpose Statement

Several researchers have concluded that many principals are not well-trained in special education processes (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Therefore, it is essential for school systems to examine the involvement of principals in special education. The purpose of this study was to investigate what elementary principals reported about their participation in special education. This study examined the special education activities elementary principals reported they were involved in, the challenges elementary principals faced with special education, and (c) the types of support elementary principals said they need to implement special education effectively. The interviews were designed to obtain information to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are elementary principals involved in the special education implementation in their schools?
2. What barriers or challenges do elementary principals experience while implementing special education?
3. What support do elementary principals need to supervise special education implementation?

Methodology

The researcher selected a basic qualitative design for this study based on a review of the research literature. Qualitative inquiry proved the method of choice for this study because it can occur in natural settings and is grounded in participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell, qualitative research “is

based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity” (p. 23). The qualitative research design is also one of the most common forms of inquiry in education and was appealing for a study in education since examination may bring about further understanding and, as a result, offer the opportunity to improve practice and inform policy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).).

Specifically, the researcher used a qualitative research design to uncover principals’ reported involvement in special education. The study involved the collection of data through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The questions utilized in these interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their responses. A quantitative study was not considered because it can only offer a statistical analysis of a phenomenon. In contrast, a qualitative study allows the researcher to dig deeper into the meaning behind thoughts and comments made by participants (Hatch, 2002). A quantitative study was not considered because the sample was purposive rather than random and stated before the study was conducted. A quantitative portion of this study could have provided valuable survey information that could have provided additional data on the causal relationship between principals’ attitudes, confidence with special education, and knowledge on the core principles of IDEA.

Role of the Researcher

Before detailing the study’s procedures, it is important to acknowledge the important role of the researcher in qualitative research. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument to collect and analyze data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher collected data using semi-structured, individual interviews guided by an interview protocol in this study. Because all the information was collected and

interpreted by the researcher, the procedures needed to adhere to established practices, including identifying potential biases the researcher may have concerning special education and elementary principals.

The researcher's commitment to special education and her personal beliefs aligned resulted in the conviction that all special education students deserve access to quality teachers and administrators who will treat special education students and non-disabled students with equity. As an educator of 23 years, the researcher's knowledge and experience gained as a special education teacher, a Central Office Special Education Specialist (COSES), and now as an Elementary Special Education Supervisor inspired the interest that led to this study. At the time of the inquiry, the researcher had been employed in the district of study for 15 years and had served as the system's Elementary Special Education Supervisor for three years. Before becoming a supervisor, the researcher was a COSES for 11 years. The researcher supervises individuals assigned to support implementing and interpreting special education in elementary schools.

The researcher holds the following endorsements for state certification: Elementary Education, Elementary/Middle special education, Administration, and Supervisor of Special Education. During the researcher's eight years as a special education teacher, she worked in two schools under two principals involved with special education. These school leaders played integral roles in the special education processes through their interactions with parents and special education personnel. The principals also appeared to promote high expectations and access to general education for students receiving special education. These experiences led this researcher to believe that school

principals can ensure equitable access to quality education for students with disabilities with adequate training and collaboration.

As the Instructional Supervisor for Elementary Special Education, the researcher serves as the supervisor for 12 COSES and three central office resource support teachers who support all elementary schools in the district. As the supervisor of COSES, the researcher is responsible for the direct supervision of these specialists and resource teachers to ensure that the delivery of special education and related services complies with federal, state, and local mandates. The COSES provides technical assistance to parents, principals, teachers, and other school staff to interpret and articulate special education regulations, policies, and procedures.

The researcher strove for objectivity and kept an open mind about the respondents who agreed to participate in the study. The researcher's daily work responsibilities were not influenced by the school where a participant worked, or the researcher's staff assigned to support the participants' schools. During interviews, participants revealed positive and negative interactions about the support from the central office and guidance received in their role as principals.

The District of Study

This study took place in Salix Public School District, located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Salix had over 125,000 students enrolled in grades pre-kindergarten through grade 12 who lived in suburban, urban, and rural neighborhoods. The district had the following racial/ethnic makeup: Black (55%), Hispanic/Latinx (36%), White (4%), Asian American (5%), Native American/Alaska Native (0.3%), and multiracial (1%). There were 115 traditional elementary schools. Traditional elementary

schools are defined as schools providing instruction at one or more grade levels from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 or pre-kindergarten through grade 6, and students who live within the school boundary can enroll. Of all schools in the district, a total of 79, or 37.7%, had a Title I designation, which indicated that they were “schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families (Title 1, 2018).” The DOE assigns this designation to qualifying schools “to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (DOE, 2018, p. 1).

Sample

The researcher used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and must, therefore, select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). In qualitative research, purposeful sampling allows selecting participants who meet defined criteria allowing for rich insight regarding the issue under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002, Gay et al., 2015). The participant criteria applied to the sample selection for this study included the following: (a) the participant must have been a principal of a traditional elementary school and (b) the participant must have been the principal of the same school during the 2018-2019 school year, the year before this study. Researchers agree that it takes at least two years for a principal to establish patterns of leadership behaviors (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Elementary principals may be the only building administrators compared to middle and high schools. The researcher did not recruit principals of kindergarten through 8th-grade, middle schools, high schools, schools with lottery admission, such as public charter schools, Montessori schools, and language immersion schools. The target

sample size was five to ten principals. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler (2010) indicated that no set minimum exists for sample size in qualitative research, and the respective researcher subjectively determines the appropriate number.

Sixty-six, or 57.3%, of the 115 traditional elementary schools were Title I schools. The percentage of students with disabilities receiving special education services in the 115 traditional elementary schools ranged from less than five percent to 35.5% of the total school enrollment (State Department of Education, 2019). The researcher listed the 115 traditional elementary schools in the district on a spreadsheet with the following demographic information obtained from the State Department of Education website: (a) percentage of special education students, (b) total school enrollment, and (c) Title I status. The researcher obtained the following information located on Salix's website: (a) schools' address, to identify the region, (b) schools with designated special education programs, and (c) the appointment and transfers list from the summer of 2019. Forty-eight schools were eliminated because they had less than 8% special education enrollment, leaving 67 traditional elementary schools. The researcher reviewed Salix's August 2019 publicly available list of appointments and transfers to identify elementary schools with new principals and eliminated ten additional schools for recruitment due to the schools having new principals. The researcher was left with a pool of 57 schools to recruit participants for the study. The rationale for limiting the participant selection to traditional elementary schools centered on the variations in the IDEA procedures at different levels of a child's education. Kraft (2016) noted that elementary school principals typically do not encounter situations where they must provide a FAPE to students with disabilities in the juvenile correctional facilities. Additionally, specific

provisions in the IDEA, such as transition planning, which starts within a year of a student turning 14, are only implemented at the middle and high school levels.

Furthermore, the IDEA has provisions regarding disciplining students with disabilities, and discipline issues may be different at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Principals face a variety of special education responsibilities at every school level.

Recruitment

The researcher obtained the email addresses of eligible principals from the individual schools' websites and sent separate recruitment emails to participants that invited them to participate in the study (see Appendix C). The researcher principals and the email explained that the research was being conducted as part of the researcher's dissertation requirement at the University of Maryland. The email provided an overview of the study, including the purpose, an overview of the sample, the interview process, and the estimated amount of time the interview would require. The email also stressed the confidentiality of the interview data. Interested principals responded to the recruitment email and received a follow up email one week later (see Appendix D).

Twelve principals indicated interest by responding to the recruitment follow-up email. After a principal expressed interest through email, the researcher sent an email requesting a date and time to schedule a telephone call or virtual conference using Zoom to review the study. Zoom is a web-based video conferencing tool that allows users to meet online, with or without video (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). If the principal preferred a phone conference, the researcher requested a contact number and called the principal within three days of accepting the invitation.

Of the twelve principals who expressed interest, two responded several months after the researcher had held interviews with ten principals. Both administrators had led schools with a designated special education program for students with Autism, had small and medium school enrollments, and 13.8% and 16.8% special education student enrollment. The researcher emailed both principals, thanking them for their interest, and informed them that no additional interviews would be completed.

In total, ten principals took part in the study. Before speaking with each of the ten principals, the researcher sent the Informed Consent Form through email. During the initial meeting with the ten principals, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, reviewed the Informed Consent Form, and addressed any questions the principals had. Each returned the Informed Consent Form through email, electronically signed it with a digital signature or typing their full name on the form.

Interview Guide

The researcher utilized an interview guide for the study. The interview guide included nine semi-structured questions and four scenarios that were aligned to the research questions. When participants responded to the scenarios, they were requested to indicate what they have done or would do in response to such a scenario. In addition, participants were asked to identify the resources or people they would turn to for guidance, the potential barriers, and the support or training they wish they had received before becoming a principal that would have prepared them for the situation. The scenarios were designed to (a) encourage participants to think more deeply about and report on their own experiences regarding special education situations and (b) facilitate discussions of special education that participants might find difficult. The researcher

created the scenarios based on a pattern of complaints filed by parents and advocates of children in Salix to the State Department of Education. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to probe into the principal's special education experience.

Interview Guide Field Test

Obtaining feedback from individuals who shared characteristics like the research sample was critical in developing the interview guide (Gay et al., 2014). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), "field tests involve asking peers or colleagues for feedback and input regarding proposed research instrument" (p. 75). The field test, conducted before recruitment, allowed the researcher to determine if the interview questions were clear and identify any potential clarification questions a participant might ask. The field test also allowed the researcher to determine if certain questions appeared frustrating, confusing, or might cause a participant to respond off-topic. The field test also allowed the researcher to become familiar with and practice the interview questions (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). In the present study, field test participants provided feedback or suggestions on the interview questions.

During March 2020, the researcher emailed seven central office personnel, inviting them to participate in the field test. The individuals included former elementary principals and supervisors of elementary principals in the district. Two of the seven individuals responded and agreed to participate in the field test. The researcher corresponded with one reviewer, Dr. Johnson, through email at the beginning of April and coordinated a virtual meeting with the second reviewer, Dr. Wilson (a pseudonym), three weeks later. The researcher asked both experts (a) to read each question in the

interview guide, (a) provide feedback about the need to revise any of the content, (c) indicate whether the questions were leading to responses that would help answer the research questions, and (d) provide guidance or suggestions about the structure of the interview guide. Each of the two experts earned a doctorate, was a former elementary principal, and had experience and knowledge coaching principals in the elementary school setting.

Dr. Johnson, the first expert, was a mentor for school-based administrators in Salix, served as an elementary school principal for nine years, was a middle school assistant principal, and worked as a supervisor for various teacher and administrator leadership programs in the district. This expert also taught at a local university. Dr. Johnson worked in the Salix central office and had been in education for over 20 years. He served as an elementary principal for nine years, an assistant principal for three years, and a teacher for four years. Dr. Johnson held the following certification endorsements: elementary, middle school administration, and Superintendent. The call with Dr. Johnson took place on April 1, 2020, by phone. A copy of the draft interview guide was sent in advance of the conference through email communication.

During the conference, Dr. Johnson recommended that if a principal shared that they were formerly an assistant principal during the interview, the researcher should inquire if their principal required them to attend IEP meetings. Dr. Johnson indicated that the questions were appropriate and wondered if the principals would be honest about their involvement or lack of participation in special education. The researcher stated that the confidentiality procedures and the purpose of the study would be reviewed before each interview began. Dr. Johnson inquired about the interview format, and the

researcher shared that the interviews would be one-on-one. Dr. Johnson inquired how the researcher would ask the participants questions since a face-to-face interview was not an option. The questions would be presented through the Zoom platform. The researcher shared that her computer would be shared so participants could see the Google Slide presentation. The presentation slides had individual questions. Dr. Johnson informed the researcher that he thought the scenarios were relatable to the district's elementary principals' experiences. There was no recommendation for the removal of any of the interview questions.

Dr. Wilson worked in the Central Office of Salix. She was an elementary principal for nine years and a classroom teacher for fifteen years. Dr. Wilson held the following certification endorsements: school counseling, business education, and superintendent. The researcher sent Dr. Wilson a copy of the interview guide before the scheduled virtual conference. On April 21, 2020, the researcher met with Dr. Wilson, through a Zoom conference, to review the interview protocol. Dr. Wilson stated she felt it was important for the researcher to interview principals who led schools of varying demographics. The researcher confirmed the intent of the study recruitment process, which was reviewed with Dr. Wilson. Dr. Wilson recommended that the researcher add the following question for each situation that a principal had experienced: "What support would you have liked to have had to handle this situation?" The question was added to the interview guide. There was no recommendation for the removal of any of the questions. Revision suggestions to the interview guide and questions were completed before interviewing study participants (Gay et al., 2015).

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted virtually through Zoom. Interviews took place over two weeks between April 27 and May 7, 2020. While the study was being conducted, the State Superintendent of Schools ordered all public schools in the state closed, effective March 16, 2020, due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (State Department of Education, 2020). The University of Maryland provided access to a full Zoom license for students. Each participant shared that they were comfortable using a virtual two-way live platform. The researcher also reminded each participant that the location for the interview required little background noise and that the interview should not be interrupted.

The researcher started each interview by reviewing the written Informed Consent Form previously signed by the participant (see Appendix E). Before the interviews, the researcher transferred the interview guide to a Google Slide presentation visible to each participant during the session. The researcher then began recording and asked the following questions:

1. Do I have your permission to record the interview digitally?
2. Have you read the Informed Consent Form?
3. Do you have any questions concerning the consent document?

The researcher recorded the interviews on Zoom and the Voice Memos app on an iPad as a backup to ensure the interview data was captured successfully (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used the recorded audio-only file feature in Zoom, and a local recording feature allowed the researcher to record each interview audio locally to a computer which was later transferred to a password-protected hard drive. A lapel

microphone sensitive to the acoustics of the researcher's location aided in capturing audio. The interviews lasted between approximately 54 minutes and 1 hour and 39 minutes with an average of 73 minutes per interview.

Data Analysis

With qualitative research, data analysis involves the collection, preparation, organization, and reduction of data continuously (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research can generate a lot of data, which can be difficult for a novice researcher to manage and time-consuming to analyze (Wang, 2013). When conducting a qualitative study, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend that the researcher analyze data simultaneously while collecting data.

In the present study, the researcher utilized a thematic method of analysis. Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns [themes] within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The thematic analysis gives researchers flexibility in how the data is examined, provides a structure for the organization of themes, and assists in interpreting the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. The framework consists of the following steps: (a) being familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes or categories, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Data analysis began with the transcription of interview recordings. After each interview, the researcher downloaded the interview recordings from Zoom to a password-protected portable hard drive. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. The researcher

used Rev.com, a web-based transcription service, to transcribe the interview and ensured that a client non-disclosure agreement was signed between Rev.com and the researcher. The researcher uploaded each participant's audio interview recording from the portable hard drive to the Rev.com website. Once the transcript was complete, the researcher reviewed each document line by line, comparing the transcripts against the original audio recordings to check for accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2013). During the transcription review, the researcher assigned alphanumeric codes to participants' names and changed people's names, positions, programs, and district-specific identifying information to pseudonyms in the transcripts.

Member Checking

The researcher engaged in member checking to increase the accuracy of the data collected. Creswell (2005) described the member checking process as follows:

Member checking is the process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account. This check involves taking the findings back to the participants and asking them (in writing or an interview) about the accuracy of the report. You ask participants about many aspects of the study, such as whether the description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate to include, and if the interpretations are fair and representative. (p. 252)

The researcher conducted member checking by having the principals review their transcripts. Each participant had previously identified a preference for the member checking procedure on the Informed Consent Form. Providing options for member checking during the consent process may potentially sway an individual's decision to

participate in a research study that they otherwise might have declined (Carlson, 2010). The member checking options were to receive a paper copy, an electronic copy, or listen to an audio recording with the researcher.

The researcher sent each participant a copy of their transcripts. Nine participants requested a copy of their transcripts through email, and one participant asked for a copy of her transcripts through the mail. In the emails and the letter to the participant, the researcher informed participants of the purpose of member checking, which was to ask the interviewee whether the comments or responses seemed complete and reflected what was discussed (Creswell, 2005). Participants were also instructed not to focus on proofreading, editing for grammar, or adding or deleting material. The researcher also informed participants that quotes of their narrative contributions would be written in the study. Additionally, the researcher prepared the participants for the potential feelings or thoughts member checking may invoke when reading the transcripts. Specifically, the researcher informed the participants they may experience feelings of “self-consciousness, embarrassment, [or] the desire to do [the interview] over” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1111).

The researcher asked all participants to acknowledge receipt of the interview transcript. Seven acknowledged receiving their interview transcripts via email. Two participants responded that the transcript accurately reflected the discussion, stating that the “transcript captured our conversation very comprehensively” and “[the transcript] captures my statements.” One participant shared this thought: “I did not realize that I was talking so much.” She thanked the researcher for allowing her to review the transcript but provided no additional feedback. One participant said she “read it over, and the gist of our conversation is there, but the transcription was not 100% accurate,” and she thanked

me for sharing. The researcher then sent a revised copy of the transcript to this participant with the grammatical errors corrected. However, before she received the revised document, the participant emailed the researcher stating that there were grammatical errors, but “the context/gist was there, and I feel my thoughts are represented.”

Thematic Analysis

To prepare for the thematic analysis of transcribed interviews, the researcher became familiar with the data. The researcher used the following processes to accomplish this aim: (a) listened to the audio recording, (b) reviewed the written transcription of the audio recording for accuracy and made edits, and (c) read the transcriptions several times. The researcher conducted listened to the audio and reviewed it before the member checking. The researcher also read each transcript three to four times to establish initial codes and themes, then analyzed and coded each participant’s transcript individually (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke’s (2013) thematic analysis proved helpful because it helped the researcher to identify “[the commonalities in] the way a topic is talked or written about and making sense of those commonalities (p. 57).

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis required the researcher to generate initial codes. “Codes are labels that are assigned symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles et al., 2014, p.71). The codes generated in this study were directly linked to responses provided by participants based on their responses to interview questions. The researcher read each transcript multiple times to discover possible codes and patterns within the data.

The researcher used Nvivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software available to University of Maryland students, to organize and code the transcribed

interview data from the virtual interviews. The researcher uploaded the transcripts into Nvivo and used color coding to generate initial codes, which helped the researcher experiment with different codes and themes.

The researcher also used an inductive thematic analysis. Inductive thematic analysis is grounded in data and not aligned to a theory. The researcher assigned codes by reading the transcripts line by line and generating codes. Then the researcher began the coding process by highlighting similar phrases on the interview transcripts and attempting to group commonalities connected to the research questions. The researcher grouped the codes to generate several themes, and during the coding process, the researcher identified themes derived from the initial codes. These themes occurred throughout the interviews and were used to answer the research questions posed in this study.

Section III. Summary of Results and Conclusions

This study investigated ten elementary principals' reported involvement in the implementation of specific IDEA provisions. The researcher conducted ten virtual interviews with the principals and, through analyses, identified themes regarding involvement in IDEA and perceived barriers to involvement and supports needed. This section will first present the participants' demographic information and themes responding to the three research questions.

Research Site and Participant Sample

This study took place in Salix in a large school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The researcher recruited elementary (pre-K – 5, pre-K - 6) school principals to participate. The percentage of special education students enrolled ranged from a low of 8% to 31%. Six schools were Title I designated, and six also had designated special education programs. Schools with designated special education programs have classrooms for special education students who require instruction in a self-contained classroom taught by a special education teacher with a reduced student-to-teacher ratio. Table 7 has the demographic data for each of the ten schools where the participants were principals (names of the schools were changed).

Table 7*Participant School Demographics by Percentage of Special Education Students*

School	Special Education Percentage	Special Education Program	Enrollment	Title I
Maple	8.3	No	Large: 846	Yes
Beech	8.4	No	Large: 613	Yes
Lilac	8.4	No	Medium: 473	No
Walnut	9.8	Yes	Large: 667	No
Dogwood	10.6	Yes	Large: 804	Yes
Holly	13.2	No	Medium: 546	No
Birch	14.2	Yes	Large: 609	Yes
Willow	25	Yes	Medium: 404	Yes
Oak	30.5	Yes	Small: 324	No
Hazel	31.1	Yes	Small: 367	Yes

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) an elementary principal of a traditional elementary school and (b) must have been the school's principal during the 2018-2019 school year. The ten principals ranged in experience as elementary administrators from 2 to 20 years. Eight of the principals worked in the same school where they started their jobs as principals. Nine of the principals served as an assistant principal before becoming a principal. Five of the 10 participants were special education certified and had been special education teachers earlier in their careers. Table 8 details the ten study participants' demographic characteristics, substituting an alphanumeric code for participant names to maintain confidentiality.

Table 8*Participants Demographics*

Principal	School	Number of Years Principal	Years in Position	Was an Assistant Principal	Taught Special Education	Certification Areas
Paris	Birch	15	15	Yes	Yes	Special Education
Rose	Walnut	6	3	No	No	Elementary, Middle School, Math,
Ann	Willow	11	3	Yes	Yes	Special Education, Elementary, Early Childhood
Jan	Oak	2	2	Yes	Yes	Elementary Special Education
Lily	Beech	19	19	Yes	No	Elementary
Mary	Holly	6	6	Yes	No	Elementary
Gina	Dogwood	20	20	Yes	No	Special Education, Guidance Counseling
Betty	Lilac	3	3	Yes	No	Elementary, Early Childhood
Mark	Maple	6	6	Yes	No	Mathematics
Sue	Hazel	8	8	Yes	Yes	Early Childhood, Special Education, Reading Specialist

Key Findings by Research Question

The researcher used a qualitative research design. Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted during the spring of 2020 to determine the extent of principals' involvement with special education, their perceived barriers, and the support they feel they require to succeed in special education. As described in Section II, the findings that addressed the research questions were identified through Braun and Clarke's

(2006) thematic analysis process. The researcher asked interview questions and scenarios that were mapped to the research questions guiding this study. Appendix F outlines how the interview questions relate to the research questions in this study.

At the start of each interview, the researcher asked participants to share the special education training or support they received since becoming a principal. The participants reported that external support and school-based training was provided. External support referred to any support or training that was not in-house and required someone like the COSES, not physically based in the school to provide guidance, training, or assistance. Paris shared that “our COSES has been very resourceful” to her students and teachers. Sue praised the “great” support from the COSES, as well as other specialists, including the “elementary autism specialist,” and that “we have the support that comes in on a regular basis” and “so consistently that it feels like its full time.” The participants also described regular “check-ins” with the COSES and the special education chairperson. Rose explained that the special education chairperson would “send out information to her if there are reports or things that [the school] should be aware of.” The principals shared that the COSES comes to schools to provide training for teachers and have regular meetings with the principal. Additionally, the principals shared that they could contact the COSES and ask specific questions.

The participants also discussed formal and informal training received as a principal. Regarding the formal special education training and support, the participants discussed structured and regular training for principals scheduled by the district. Sometimes it was provided by the COSES and takes place in the school. Regarding the content, Ann shared that the topics may vary and may include, for example, “universal

design” or “being able to determine and discuss accommodations, modifications, what is specialized instruction?” Some participants shared that this type of training had increased at the district principals’ meetings in recent years. Participants discussed informal special education training and support for principals. Rather than official and structured training, this training, according to Sue, “had been a result of attending my [school’s special education team] meetings with my [special education] coordinator and this type of thing.” Rose shared that “most of the training” or information has been through information shared at principals’ meetings, from the special education chairperson, or when the COSES “shares updates or information.”

In addition, the participants discussed school-based training or support they provided for both the special and the general education teachers in their schools. The training for general education teachers generally occurred during “collaborative planning time” (Sue), during which they collaborate with special education teachers. As Rose explained,

We have our special education teachers sit in the collaborative planning for the grade levels that they support, so they’re also able to work with the teachers on how do you scaffold this assignment. What’s the entry point that you need to build into this assignment to help support these special education students in your classroom?

Additionally, Mark explained that he does “informal observations through their classrooms,” during which “I’m looking for patterns.” Subsequently, “I put on, and I facilitate personally, professional developments in the evenings.” School-based support for special education teachers occurred through collaborative planning meetings or school-based training from the COSES.

Participants were asked to estimate how many school hours a week they spent on special education. The ten principals indicated that they spent a range of about one to two to 30 hours per week on special education. Sue, certified in special education, estimated that she spent about 30 hours a week on special education issues. Her time was likely influenced by the school's autism special education program and the 31.1% of special education students enrolled. According to Sue:

Anything that has to do with my school is in that co-taught model...I'm constantly dealing with the challenges from the teacher's perspective of how they can best support students, how they can work together... and still support their students' IEP."

On the end of the spectrum was participant Paris, special education certified, who had a special education program for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Unlike Sue, Paris had a full-time special education administrator who specifically supervised the school's designated special education program and assisted the principal with attending IEP meetings for the students in general education. Paris reported that she had more time to deal with the school's general needs and the special education administrator who handled issues related to special education. Lily reported spending five hours, and Mary, four to five, shared that their time was impacted by sharing responsibility with their assistant principals. Lily further explained that she reflected on her transition to administration and shared that "...since I did not have that experience as an assistant principal. I think it is [essential] for an assistant principal to be involved in decision-making for special education students."

When the researcher asked participants to describe how the IEP meeting calendar was approved and managed in their schools, participants expressed various tactics used to manage the IEP calendar. The development of the calendar communicates to required IEP team participants, which includes general education teachers, parent/guardians, special education teachers, related service providers, and administrators, the purpose, date, and time of when an IEP meeting will take place. When scheduling an IEP, required IEP members must be invited and attend to ensure compliance with IDEA regulations. Principals can ensure that staff who work with students with IEPs are supported and held accountable for IEP implementation.

The calendar development involved the school's special education chairperson or program coordinator's organization skills in developing and scheduling meetings that comply with IDEA timelines. All but four participants, three of the four were special education certified, reported that the special education coordinator or chairperson managed and approved the IEP meeting calendar. The four principals shared that they reviewed the calendar before it was shared with other team members. Betty said that she 'double-checks' to ensure there are no conflicts with timelines and her ability to attend. Paris shared that that staff has the autonomy to develop. Still, she expected the chairperson to "make sure [meeting were] not [on] a day that overlaps or [conflicts] to where I cannot be there." However, Paris reported that she only spent an hour or two a week because a special education program coordinator worked at the school. Jan, special education certified, shared how she modeled how to create the calendar with the considerations for instruction and caseloads. Jan was concerned with the impact of staff missing instruction due to IEP or SIT meeting participation within the same week.

You [have] a lot of [staff] not providing services within a week or two if you are not very careful with the [IEP] calendar... We sat down as a [administrative] team, and we looked at [the calendar]. We had to look at when teachers were teaching. We had to look at when service providers were providing services...I kind of modeled that process...

Principal's Special Education Responsibilities. When the researcher asked participants to describe how the time was spent on issues relating to special education, principals described responsibilities to provide services to special education and school staff. Table 9 lists the principal's responsibilities the participants discussed.

Table 9

Principal's Special Education Responsibilities

Activities	Number of Participants Who Mentioned	Number of Times It Was Mentioned in Total
Coordinating and overseeing the teaching and special education support	10	40
Supervising the special education case management, student progress and instruction	10	18
Attending and facilitating meetings	10	16
Addressing parent concerns	9	16
Students with challenging behaviors	8	14
Assessing the students' special needs	4	6
One-to-one consultations with teachers	4	5

Coordinating and overseeing the teaching and special education support.

Coordinating and overseeing the teaching and special education support was an essential element of the principals' daily routine involved observations of special education

students in the classroom, including "making sure that [assistive] technology was used, "making sure that manipulatives [are being used]," "making sure that the [paraprofessionals] are actively involved within the classrooms" and "that the [special education] resource teachers are following through, doing what they need to do to support the [general education] teacher" (Paris). Jan, a former special education teacher with a school with 30.5% special education percentage and a designated special education program, identified several purposes of her classroom observations when she used an accommodation matrix during observations:

When I go into classrooms, I'm [observing] instruction [to ensure IEP is being implemented] ...I know [the student's] disability is X. Let me go and look and see what accommodations would be most appropriate for the lesson or if the accommodations are being provided...If the [special education] teacher isn't providing [the accommodations] [I'm looking to see] what other adults in the room can provide those supports.

Participants commonly reported that their involvement in special education at their schools included participating or providing support for general education and special education teachers. Students with disabilities received services in general education at each of the participant's schools. For some participants, the support provided was individually focused and tailored to the general or special education teachers that needed help.

Mark worked with his general education teachers to understand their role as service providers by reviewing the IEP document. Mark shared that he does this because

in the students' IEP, "it doesn't just identify the service provider as the special education resource teacher. It also identifies a general educator."

An aspect of principals' responsibility was meeting the teachers face-to-face. Face-to-face meetings allowed an opportunity for staff openly share their challenges with the principal "from the teacher perspective of how they can best support students" (Sue). As Sue led a school with a designated special education program and 31.1% special education percentage, further explained,

I try and hear them" and "give [the teachers] times when they can vent to me. I'll come to a [special education] collaborative planning meeting...I get a chance to hear [the concerns] and tell them how we're going to work to solve them.

Overall, as Sue explained, "I try and make it as supportive as I can." Observing the teacher assisted Rose with determining "whether we needed more training for our special education teachers" as well as "helping general education teachers to understand that as the teacher, you still have a role in supporting the special education student in your class." Observations allowed the principals to identify potential issues at the school before a case came to a crisis point and acquire support for that teacher without spending time these participants did not have.

One-to-one consultations with teachers. Supporting the teachers' work with special education students included the principal having one-on-one consultations with special education and general education teachers. Jan shared her special education involvement increased and what face-to-face consultations looked like:

I spent a lot of time with my music teacher because I [received] some parent concerns about her instruction. When I started peeling back the

layers, it had to do with her not understanding how to meet the needs of special education students. I [began] to look at [her] lesson plan, and part of what I'm looking for [was] how [she] is going to meet the needs of special education students.

Unlike Jan, Rose, who spent about five hours per week on special education, which she indicated was more than previous years, reported that the support she provided her staff was less about triaging specific issues. Rose said it was more about identifying each teacher's strengths and finding ways to build on those strengths. Although not certified in special education, Rose conveyed confidence in supporting all her teachers. Since Rose spent less time directly supporting special education at her school, she described how she helped teachers to be the best teacher they could be to all her students,

Instruction is my thing ...pedagogy is pedagogy. I know good instruction...So having those conversations with teachers is something I'm always comfortable with...I can tell you that I see this child is struggling with [how] this lesson is being delivered; let's talk about our delivery. How do we scaffold this? What is it that we need to do to present this differently to students?

Usually, these private consultations aim to improve the teacher or address a specific issue. Sue shared that “if it's a teacher that I have concerns about, that has repeatedly not given whatever needed materials before or after, then I have a stern conversation with that teacher to let them know how important this is, these are legal ramifications, all of that.”

Since students with disabilities received services in general education at each of the participant's schools, participants provided coaching, specifically for staff new to the

field of special education, to better support students receiving special education. The coaching was individually focused and tailored to the general or special education teachers who needed support from some participants. Ann, a former special education teacher, spent "probably 50% "of her day on special education issues, had several new special education teachers in their first year of teaching, and were former paraprofessionals, new general education teachers, and new support staff. Ann modeled lessons for the special education teachers and spent time training the new special education teachers on how to "speak with parents at IEP meetings regarding student progress. What do we say? What is the right way to word things?"

Supervising the special education case management, student progress and instruction Another responsibility that the principals discussed was supervising the special education case management, student progress and instruction, student placements, and special education in the school. Rose reflected on various aspects of special education implementation that she overlooks: Rose reflected on multiple aspects of special education paperwork and staff accepting responsibility for student learning.

...Completion of [special education] reports and getting things turned in either on time or completed properly. We had to look at whether we needed more training for our special education teachers with like the prior written notices and the different elements that they were being held responsible for as special education teachers and..., the [general education] teachers feeling like they weren't responsible for the special education students. Helping [general education] teachers understand that you still support the special education student[s] in your class as the teacher. And so, all of those I couldn't just leave to someone else to do.

Gina described how she would handle a teacher constantly unable to submit IEP paperwork to parents on time, as described in Scenario 1. Gina said how she would handle this situation:

If I saw that a teacher did not feel comfortable or did not know how to collect the data necessary for an IEP meeting, I would ask other persons in the school to work with that teacher...

Like Gina, Jan indicated that a big part of her job as principal is monitoring students' progress and teachers' performance. Jan reported that she monitored the on-time submission of IEP paperwork, as described in scenario 1, due to her background.

According to Jan,

Everywhere I've been [monitoring IEP timelines has] been part of my responsibility. Even when I was a special education coordinator, my principal had me do a lot of work around...monitoring implementation.

Assessing the students' special needs. Regarding supervising student placements specifically, these discussions were triggered by the researcher's questions regarding scenarios three and four; a general education teacher expresses concerns that a student requires a change in placement and a parent does not agree with the child's placement, respectively. The principals responded not just with hypothetical reflections but rather with specific examples of experiences that they had had. Paris provided an account of a situation in which "a teacher has felt that our [special education] program was not enough to support a student." As Paris explained, she oversaw the whole procedure. A special education resource teacher was first sent to observe the student and determine "if maybe we need to look at any other testing" and "to discuss the student's growth of lack of

growth within the classroom.” Subsequently, the principal scheduled an IEP meeting to discuss the student and decide whether a different placement was needed. The principal involved the COSES to conduct an independent review of the case. Paris stated the purpose for involving the COSES “to have more than just our opinion but the opinion of an outside person.” The other participants also described similar experiences, including Sue, who explained that “[administration], myself and my team” are involved in a formal meeting “just so that we can hear what [the teachers’ concerns are... [and] hear where they’re coming from”. A related responsibility of the principal was helping with reviewing the student’s special education needs. As Jan explained, in addition to team meetings, a principal may directly observe the students in a classroom and make recommendations based on the students’ needs.

Students with challenging behaviors. Another area in which the principal may be directly involved in dealing with special education students with challenging behaviors. As Sue explained, “I’m usually helping in either coming up with a plan or coming to the rescue when the child needs a break.” These situations may involve “very, very severe behaviors” (Gina) and “dangerous” (Rose) cases, such as when a student “would throw furniture and things of that nature.” The principals shared that they would be the first to address this situation and would later overlook any possible disciplinary procedures and, if needed, reach out for additional support from the central office. Jan, a former special education teacher who spent eight hours weekly on special education, indicated that she provided direct assistance to teachers. Jan shared that she supported a struggling special education teacher identifying behavior triggers for a student and identifying and implementing strategies to address those behaviors. According to Jan,

One of the things I do is sit down with the teacher and review the IEP...Looking at the IEP, talk[ing] about implementation. A lot of times, what I do is I just go in and observe the student and identify what the student is struggling with...I always start with the IEP.

Addressing parent concerns. The principal was also involved if a parent does not agree with a child's placement. As Rose explained, "Often we have this situation once a parent doesn't get what they want," and "in this situation, I would revisit the parent concerns... We can go back and look at those recommendations that were made by the SIT team". Another responsibility that the participants discussed, namely talking to parents, and addressing their concerns. These accounts were also predominantly responses to the scenario where parents do not agree with their child's placement. The principals report that parents often contact them when there are issues or concerns with their child. As Ann explained, "it would not be a phone call, it would not be an email," but rather "a face-to-face conversation because I want parents to understand." Ann stated that "I have a really good relationship with my parents," stressing that it is crucial to maintain such positive relationships. Ann explained that it is very important to treat the parents with respect and listen to them "because sometimes they just want to get it off their chest." Ann credited her special education success to the positive relationship they maintained with parents. Ann's habit of routinely checking in with parents, carefully collecting their feedback, and listening to their concerns partially fostered this positive relationship. According to Ann, "I think it's the relationship that you have with the parents. So, listening to the parent, what are the concerns? Why do you think that this isn't the right place?" While each participant's strategy varied, all the participants

indicated that when they faced a challenging situation, one of the first things they would do was collect feedback. Principals used this feedback to inform their decision-making and make informed decisions that could benefit students and teachers at their school.

Principals attend and facilitate meetings. Many issues, arising in the school, required the principal's attention, and it was often through team meetings that these issues were addressed. In addition, however, to assembling a "crisis team" (Rose) to respond to unexpectedly emerging challenges with students, parents, or staff, regular IEP meetings were a part of the school routine that often takes as much as time as "at least an hour or more" (Mark) every day. As the participants described their response to scenario one and interview question two (tell me about how the IEP meeting calendar is managed and approved in your school?), each mentioned their participation in IEP meetings. All participants indicated they attended IEP meetings. None of the participants stated that they attended every IEP meeting scheduled at their school. All but one participant reported they frequently attended IEP meetings, particularly regarding students with challenging behaviors or a parental concern relating to their child's progress. Sue shared that she "is careful to attend all of the [IEP meetings] that might be a priority" and rearranges her schedule to attend. Sue stated that high priority meetings were meetings "where an advocate was present," "litigious parents," or meetings where a first-year special educator was the case manager.

Jan shared that:

There are specific [IEP meetings] that the program coordinator will ask me to sit [in] on. There are certain cases I sit on...I also try to attend the not-making progress meetings and then the reevaluation meetings. I figure if I do those, I have a sense too of when I'm going into the classroom...

Participants prioritized their attendance at meetings that they felt were non-negotiable for them. Meetings that participants considered priority were:

- meetings where advocates or attorneys were present,
- students who exhibited challenging behaviors,
- parents who disagreed with the school
- students who were not making progress and.
- meeting where central office participants were present

IEP meetings that principals, Sue, and Rose, reported being less likely to attend were annual review meetings or meetings where there were no concerns expressed by an IEP team member or “[IEP team], doesn’t need me.”

Regarding IEP meetings, “there are certain days for IEP for the special program and IEP meetings for general education” (Paris). Although Paris usually “try to make it a priority ... to always be in the meetings”, if they cannot attend, the SPED chair, the assistant principal, or the special education coordinator will be the principal’s designee. When asked how they decide which meetings to attend, the participants explained that although it is always their goal to attend, the kind of meetings they prioritize are the ones in which their presence is required. These may include, for example, “the ones where I know the parent is difficult” or “if I have some concerns about what the teacher may or

may not say,” as well as the meetings where there are “advocates, lawyers, care navigators” (Mary). Paris also described meetings where advocates are present as a “non-negotiable,” along with “if it’s a case of being out of compliance, a grievance.” Ann also tries to attend “the hot meetings,” including those where parents or advocates are present or those dealing with “a compliance issue.”

Barriers to Effective Implementation of Special Education

The principals indicated several barriers that they encountered. Table 10 displays the barriers to the effective implementation of special education. In the following section, the barriers will be outlined.

Table 10

Barriers to Effective Implementation of Special Education

Activities	Number of Participants Who Mentioned	Number of Times It Was Mentioned in Total
Principals' lack of training and limited training opportunities	9	12
General education teachers' resistance or lack of collaboration	8	12
General education teachers' limited knowledge and training	7	19
Not enough specialized staff	7	11
The time needed to implement changes and see the results	6	10
Communicating with parents	6	10
Knowing and following ethical guidelines and legal procedures	6	8
Not enough resources and support from the Central Office	5	10
Diagnoses and student placement	5	6
Workload	5	6

Principals' lack of training and limited training opportunities. The most discussed barrier to implementing special education was the principals' lack of training and limited training opportunities. Sue raised concerns about this and believed this to be a challenge. She noted that because of the lack of formal training, she does not feel “comfortable with all the nuances of IEP online system,” including “how to input everything, and where everything goes.” As a result, she explained, “I rely heavily on my [special education chairperson]” to be showing these things. Rose felt that because “I have not had [any training] on special education” in terms of formal training, there were gaps in her skills and knowledge, some of which were described in the following extract:

What I feel least comfortable with is probably more so the specifics. I know there is a prior written notice, but what goes into the prior written notice? I know that there are these different components of the IEP, but [I would not be able to say what goes into every component]. Some of our students' needs are an area where, you know, then I get stuck... We have students with emotional disabilities; their needs are different from those of our students who have...developmental delays. So, it is those specific pieces. Like when you start getting down deeper, that is where [I am out of my depth].

Participants expressed similar concerns, pointing to the informal nature of the training, and listing aspects of special education that they do not feel prepared for, such as “how to deal with an aggressive child or an aggressive parent.” (Ann)

General education teachers lack collaboration with special education teachers. Another discussed challenge was general education teachers' resistance or lack of collaboration. Mark indicated that it was mostly about a “fixed mindset” of some

general education teachers who do not think special education issues should be their responsibility. Sue reported that “[general education teachers] usually “[roll] their eyes” when asked to attend additional training, on the assumption that “that’s not my job.” Rose directly expressed a view that “helping general education teachers to understand that as the teacher you still have a role in supporting the special education student in your class” is one of the everyday challenges of her work. Another form of general education teachers’ resistance was their resistance towards collaborating with special education staff. Mary explained, for example, that a teacher in her school has a “difficult personality” and “really does not want anyone in her classroom.” It “was impacting the work of the assistant in her classroom.” Betty also believed that collaboration between the general and special education teachers is “our biggest challenge” and “where the problems come in,” specifically because it “does not always go smoothly” because of some general education teachers’ resistance.

General education teachers' limited knowledge and training. General education teachers' limited knowledge and training partially link to another discussed barrier, namely general education teachers' limited knowledge and training. Another discussed barrier, general education teachers' special education knowledge, and training. Sue noted, “although we have a lot of staff, the staff are not necessarily qualified.” Ann, in turn, discussed the lack of training on co-teaching models and the full inclusion classes, which poses a problem for the new general education teachers coming to the school. Because of this lack of knowledge and training, there is also the “lack of comfort” (Ann) when dealing with special education students, which Sue believed is one reason several teachers decided to leave the school in recent years. For Ann, “general education

teachers not having the knowledge that they need to make these difficult decisions” was one of the main barriers, which may also directly lead to the general teachers’ resistance. Jan also provided an account of a teacher whom many parents had complained about and whose problem turned out to be “her not understanding how to meet the needs of students with special needs.” As she further explained, it “happens all the time” that the general teachers conclude that a child “cannot be worked with” because of the lack of expertise in dealing with such cases.”

Not enough specialized staff. As “no one has had experience in dealing with [special education cases] before” (Gina), the teachers struggle. This proves to be an even bigger problem when coupled with insufficient specialized staff as there is no [one] to support the inexperienced and unqualified teachers. Some schools have special education teachers who lack the training to meet the needs of students, and the few qualified educators “are very overwhelmed with the number of cases” (Mary).

Workload. Regarding the issue of being overwhelmed with work, the workload was also commented on by the participants. Some participants believed that “the biggest barrier is time” (Ann) and that “there is just not enough time.” In some cases, the comments also had to do with some teachers’ poor work ethic, as they tend to go home at a set time “whether their work is done or not” (Ann), leaving others with work to do. Sue also raised many concerns about her workload and not enough support to minimize it, noting that “I have to handle every challenge alone.”

Not enough resources and support from the central office. Five participants raised concerns about not having enough resources and support from the central office, which adds to the already discussed challenges of the lack of specialized staff and the

lack of training for general education teachers. Although there were instances of aggressive behaviors and other extreme cases, “we are slow to get support” (Jan), “which puts the team even at greater risk.” Mary also felt “really uncomfortable” about the school not providing sufficient support for some children. As she explained, “We just are not equipped or prepared for the children” in some cases, and there is not enough support from the outside in terms of either sending in qualified personnel or providing additional training. Feeling unprepared was also the main concern of Gina, who believed that “we need help” and “we need people to come to our aid.” In the following extract, she expressed her frustration with the lack of resources and support from the outside:

What I do not feel comfortable with, I think I spoke about this earlier, is when I feel that my hands are tied in getting the kind of help that some of our students need. When I see the violent behavior when I see people getting hurt because of the violent behavior of some of our students. I know it is the law, but I think people need to be there and see what happens. When schools just, your regular public school, are forced to provide, but cannot adequately provide the kind of services that some of our students need. Why aren't we adequately providing that? Because we do not have the resources. We do not have padded classrooms. We do not have that. We do not have the specialized training needed to work with some of the students we have had and that we are getting.

Diagnoses and student placement. Five principals raised concerns that they do not feel confident about the process of “the actual identification of putting a student into special education” (Mark). As Mark explained, “we are practicing medicine here. We are making a diagnosis that we think is accurate based on the symptoms ... but we are not

guaranteeing the right identification”. Mark further explained that he is particularly concerned about either “over-identifying” or “under-identifying” students, as well as about the cases when students whose first language is not English have been wrongly diagnosed as having a learning disability. On the other hand, Gina felt that the problem is not placing students in special education programs “unless we feel that they are going to get the most benefit from here” (Gina). Gina felt that there were many cases, especially involving violent students when students who should be in special education remained in general education programs. Gina reported that “there is a feeling that too many students are being referred to special education.” In either case, the participants who commented felt that making diagnoses and deciding about student placements is a challenging aspect of their work and something that they would need training and support.

The time needed to implement changes and see the results. Another discussed challenge was the time required to implement changes and see the results. Participants discussed the processes they had to follow, documenting student disabilities, organizing IEP meetings, and scheduling assessments for students that needed it. Participants mostly referred to the length of time it took to establish students' need for special support. Six participants indicated that the process's slowness was a barrier to effectively dealing with issues related to special education. Participants often presented the process of documenting student needs as a double-edged sword, demonstrating compliance and something that could delay more intensive support implemented and needed changes. For some participants, this barrier mainly related to moving students struggling in one classroom into another or accessing additional support for students they felt required more support than their school could provide. According to Paris, "You have to go

through that process which seems so long like a year, a whole year before you can get a child, like that, moved to a different placement." The process referred to was timelines for student evaluation for special education eligibility, implementing the IEP, gathering data on IEP implementation, and referring students to the district's Central IEP team.

Rose spoke of the issues principals faced getting supports for students who needed them. However, Rose also recognized the need to have a process to ensure students were adequately assessed and services provided before requesting more services from the district. According to Rose,

You must have a process. Otherwise, [schools] would flood special education with [students] who [they] have a hard time. If there [weren't] a process, we would just inundate that system with too many students...But I think there are cases when we all can see like [when there] is a child that needs [another placement]. There should be a way or a process where we can fast track [the student to the new placement]

Gina's response strongly agreed with what Rose reported, saying that there was not always an urgent response to the school's needs from central office personnel that this participant would like to see. In the cases of severe disabilities and violent students, time is the main challenge. Gina also wished to "have had people come and do what needs to be done more quickly" when responding to scenario two. As this participant explained, "It is frightening to think, but sometimes you wait a month or two months to get things done, and in the meantime, there is just this [significant] disruption in your classrooms and the school. Rose, in turn, raised concerns about a time when discussing the expectations of parents who always expect immediate action.

Another discussed challenge was the time needed to implement special education supports and processes such as implementing a behavior intervention plan [BIP] and gathering data to support IEP team decisions and see the results. In the cases of severe and violent students, time was the primary concern. For Mary, time was a barrier as well in a case in which a student with challenging behaviors was transferred for a more restrictive placement, and "before the child was moved to a special placement, it was a good month, month and a half before he was moved."

Parent Concerns. Participants experienced barriers addressing various issues related to parents. Some parents were "not open-minded" (Ann) and could be "very resistant to the decision that the school makes" (Paris), and this particularly referred to various decisions regarding the students' placement. Some parents, for example, may resisted the idea of their child requiring special support. As Gina explained, sometimes there was "a parent who does not feel that his or her child would ever do anything that is against the rules."

On the other hand, some parents insist that their students require an individualized approach than the student may need. As Jan explained, some parents conclude that "there is something wrong with [their child]" when their child "might just be an average student" not eligible for special education services. Parents may have many other issues, and Mary explained that "my school can have a challenging parent population," which is a burden to the teachers and the principal. As she further explained, a teacher complained that "it made him feel like he was not a good teacher because the parents had an issue or a complaint every few weeks."

Knowing and following ethical guidelines and legal procedures. Several participants raised concerns about parents bringing advocates and attorneys and making legal threats, which links to another challenge that the participants discussed knowing and following ethical guidelines and legal procedures. This barrier refers to “making the right decisions when it comes to legal things” (Paris), including “knowing the protocols, knowing the due process, rules, knowing what you can and cannot say,” and those who commented explained that this is the area of their duties that they were not comfortable with performing.

In the later part of the interview, the participants were asked to comment on hypothetical scenarios involving challenges related to special education. Most of their responses to these questions were coded as various barriers to effective implementation of special education. The scenarios usually triggered memories of experiences that the principals faced in their work. They were also asked about the type of support they would need to deal with these issues better, and these responses are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Principal’s Need for Additional Support

	Number of Participants Who Mentioned	Number of Times It Was Mentioned in Total
Dealing with aggressive behaviors	9	21
Legal procedures and interventions	7	10
General support for special education teachers	6	7
Procedures related to student placement	5	6

Dealing with aggressive behaviors. As the table demonstrates, dealing with aggressive behaviors described in Scenario two was the principals' work that they felt they would need the most support from the district. Paris, for example, believed that "having some good training around social and emotional behaviors" would help, as well as having "an on-site trained either crisis person or ... clinical social worker ... or a school psychologist." Similar views were expressed by Rose, who also felt that "there needs to be more training for everyone" regarding "how we support our students who have social-emotional needs." Like Paris, Rose also felt that in addition to having such training, having an on-site expert, in this case, a "full-time mental health provider," would help.

Regarding support from specialists dealing with this type of behavior, Jan suggested that it would help to have "someone coming in for a day or two and modeling certain behaviors for the teacher and the teacher teams." Jan also expressed a view that specialized training on how to manage aggressive behaviors would help. As "these are the things they do not teach you in college" (Ann), all nine participants who commented believed that such training would be beneficial.

Despite the participants' comfort with special education in their schools and their staff's expertise in supporting students with disabilities receiving special education, seven participants reported that the school's ability to handle certain student behaviors was a barrier to successful special education implementation. Data came from participants' responses to scenario two. Rose indicated that while they felt the school was more than able to support students with learning disabilities, they struggled to teach students identified with an emotional disability. According to Rose,

When we look at our students who have learning concerns, [teachers] are good with that...my special educators can help support that. When we start looking at some of our emotionally [disability] students, and some of the behavior students are presenting with, I find that we are all challenged [in] that area...

Mark reported a similar response to support Rose and indicated that some of the more aggressive behaviors were overwhelming for the staff, particularly the teachers with less experience. Mark reported that it took time for the teacher to understand how to handle those behaviors, and then it took more time and consistency to help the student improve. Mark said,

I had one child rip down everything in the teacher's classroom, throw it all over the place. The teacher did not know what to do when [the student] [returned] to [the classroom]. We dealt with the child. We talked to the teacher. We contacted the parent [and] we reassembled the whole room. When something like that happens, the knee jerk reaction is not necessarily the step in that [BIP].

As Mary shared, "we are not equipped or prepared for the children [for children with physical or aggressive behavior]." Mary felt there was not enough immediate support from the central office in either sending in qualified personnel at the time of the request or providing additional training.

Legal procedures and interventions. The principals also discussed the need for support with legal procedures and interventions. Response to Scenario four, in which a parent disagrees with the child's placement and plans to hire an attorney, reflects several previously discussed barriers, including knowing and following ethical guidelines and legal procedures. The participants felt that they would like to have more "knowledge of

the process and backup” (Sue) to be able to “[make] sure that you have covered whatever your bases are and if there is anything else that needs to be done in that situation” (Betty). The participants would also like to have more support “outside of the building” (Gina), or “just being able to have somebody to reach out to, the special ed chairperson, the COSES, other central office staff if needed, other departments” (Lily). To sum up, as Mary explained, “In those situations when the attorneys get involved, I would like for the school to be supported.” Paris, who was certified in special education, said,

...I think it should be some type of training for principals...on the special [education] process. Being trained on special [education] look-fors...What to look for [as to how] your special [education] team should run IEP meetings...

General support for special education teachers. Another kind of support that the principals discussed was general support for special education teachers. Some of these responses were triggered by scenario one, in which a teacher fails to provide parents with the required paperwork. Some were provided throughout the interview, for, as previously noted, the lack of specialized staff was one of the challenges that the principals discussed. Thus, the participants generally felt that “we may need training for the special educators at [the] school” (Lilly).

Procedures related to student placement. Finally, reflecting some of the challenges related to diagnoses and student placement, some principals wanted more support with procedures related to student placement. As this kind of instruction “was not part of the conversation” (Sue) in college, the participants who commented would like to know more about “the protocols of when you can determine that a child needs something more” and “when a child can switch schools or be changed to another program.” Ann

supported this point of view and explained that “principals have to [know] that there is a lot more than just a teacher saying, ‘this child needs to be taken out of my class.’”

Facilitators of Effective Implementation of Special Education. Although it was not one of the research questions and in the interview, there was no direct question about factors that may positively influence the implementation of special education, some accounts of such facilitators emerged in the interview (see Table 12).

Table 12

Facilitators of Effective Implementation of Special Education

	Number of Participants Who Mentioned	Number of Times It Was Mentioned in Total
Previous experiences and training in special education	8	11
Leadership skills and organizational strengths	5	7
Ongoing training and professional development	5	7
Being dedicated and compassionate	2	3

Previous experiences and training in special education. The most mentioned facilitators were previous experiences and training in special education. Sue, for example, believed that “because I did have the college education portion of that certification, I started at a level that most people did not.” Gina also explained that “because I have been in special education previously [and] I’ve had that experience,” she would find it easier to address the issue described in scenario four. Mark also believed that “the best support is experience” and that “I’ve learned so much by getting my own experiences.” This also means getting experiences in more challenging contexts, as in the case of Jan, who had gained experiences “in City” where “the cases were so extreme.” Ann, in turn, believed

that “everybody should have to do a rural, suburban and urban because they’re very different settings for the [principalship] and special education.” Thus, gaining experience in such different settings would help prepare the principals to deal with various cases in the future.

Based on the multi-faceted issues principals faced related to special education implementation, there were not many strategies participants indicated would ease the barriers they faced. However, four participants indicated that having a wider breadth of experience to draw from relieved the struggle of navigating these complicated issues. Ann, certified in special education, suggested that the landscape had changed a lot from when she stepped into her role as principal. Any new principal should have a deep professional background to draw from to lead a school. According to Ann,

[If] they have not had experience in various schools or settings, I think that's a hindrance. But I also believe if they're not coming to the table with some special education experience. Some principals have never sat in an IEP ...principals need to come to the [job] more well-rounded.

Gina agreed that having experience was a way to ease the difficulties principals face with special education. When asked about her ability to succeed, Gina said, "Because I have been in special education previously, I've had that experience." Mark reported that while the experience was the only support a principal could rely on, it did not necessarily have to be their own direct experience. According to Mark, "The best support is experience. So, bringing in people, opportunities where experience is either utilized or built upon." The daily responsibility impacted their ability to attend all IEP meetings, following up on the necessary paperwork and special education implementation at their schools regardless

of their background in special education.

Ongoing training and professional development. Regarding skills and experience, ongoing training and professional development were also discussed, reflecting the previously discussed main challenges to providing special education. Sue believed, for example, that “if I had a million hours in a day, then that’s what I think would help me be more successful.” Mary noted that, in general, “principals could benefit from special education,” which reflects the first facilitator discussed above.

Leadership skills and organizational strengths. Leadership skills and organizational strengths were also believed to be attributes that a principal should have. Rose stated that these are “soft skills” that cannot be taught and that “there are some pieces of being a principal that you just ...need to know”, and this leadership and people management are these skills. Only then, she explained, “I can add that special education knowledge on top.” Jan also discussed several skills related to the broadly defined organizational and leadership skills, including “meeting deadlines, creating a schedule, communicating the schedule, providing reminders.” She further concluded, “It really comes down to planning and monitoring.” The others who commented also talked about organizational skills such as planning and meeting deadlines, collaborating well with a team, and handling stress.

Being dedicated and compassionate. On top of this, two participants also believed that a successful principal in special education should be dedicated and compassionate. Sue, “would love to see more of” passion and compassion in teaching and believed that “we could all benefit from the compassion.” Mark also shared that it was crucial to “keep the child at the center of the focus” and felt that being a parent helps to

be more compassionate. He noted that it made a difference for him when he became the parent of a special education student.

Interpretation of the Findings

The study investigates how elementary principals were involved in special education, barriers encountered, and support needed. The researcher collected information from ten elementary principals to respond to questions regarding special education centered on involvement, barriers, challenges, and perceived needs. In the previous section, the researcher provided the findings from the interviews that addressed the three research questions. In this section, the researcher will interpret the findings by describing themes that emerged from across the three research questions.

Students with challenging behaviors and LRE. A significant finding was that principals did not feel successful with students who exhibited challenging behaviors. In this study, principals shared that they struggled to manage challenging behaviors, making it challenging to implement special education, give students maximum support, and maintain a safe environment. Principals reported that they feel that the number of students with behaviors has increased and become more disruptive to the school environment. When students exhibited aggressive behavior, principals wanted immediate support or a response from non-school-based personnel when they could not manage a student. These findings were consistent with previous research that principals do not feel prepared and can be overwhelmed by special education students, particularly those with behavior concerns. Evidence-based behavioral interventions such as positive behavioral support could provide principals with ways to promote and increase student success and behavior outcomes. It can be time-consuming for an elementary principal to deal with

special education students exhibiting challenging behaviors and for the students to continue receiving FAPE.

The principals reported slowness of the process as a barrier when they wanted students with challenging behaviors referred to a more restrictive LRE outside of their school. Principals reported that the special education process and timelines appeared to move slowly and were barriers to effectively dealing with school issues related to special education eligibility and placement decisions. School districts must document students' needs and offer a continuum of services before recommending a more restrictive placement. The documentation can be time-consuming and may leave a principal frustrated if they are unaware of or understand the processes. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) stipulated that identifying students' needs and ensuring that a school meets the districts' requirements can be slow. The IDEA requires schools to document, through data collection, the needs of the student and consider positive behavior supports and targeted behavior intervention plans. Principals reported that documentation could be a time-consuming task by the IEP team. Wakeman, Browder, Flores, & Ahlgrim-Dezell (2006) argued that instead of changing the students' behaviors to fit into the environment, principals need to find ways to alter the conditions within the learning environment to serve the students' behaviors. The principals in this study indicated that they and their staff require more support for dealing with students exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Participants said they felt minimally prepared or unprepared to educate students with challenging behaviors. If a principal does not have a foundational knowledge of IDEA when dealing with students with challenging behaviors, it can

impact a students' procedural safeguards for discipline and influence IEP teams to refer students for a more restrictive LRE.

Lack of foundational knowledge with Special Education Law and Practices.

Participants reported limited knowledge of student eligibility and understanding of the process for determining a student's eligibility for special education services. The special education eligibility process involves several steps, and principals identified many processes that need more support in their role. These included understanding the following processes: (a) evaluations and assessments used for determining a student's eligibility, (b) a principal's role in the IEP meeting when education eligibility, and (c) connections to placement decisions (Jesteadt, 2012; Overturf, 2007). Special education teachers, related service providers, and school psychologists are responsible for administering and interpreting assessments to determine eligibility for special education. To ensure non-discriminatory and equitable practices are in place during evaluation, administrators must understand the policies and procedures associated with referral and eligibility determination. Principals need to understand how assessments are identified and interpreted to determine eligibility for special education, indicating that principals need basic knowledge and understanding of the procedures and eligibility decisions.

The daily implementation of special education law, policies, procedures, and general special education knowledge was noted as a challenge and an area of need by participants in the study. McElhinny and Pellegrin (2014) explained that principals are also responsible for their school's IEP team's actions. The principal's role is to ensure that staff implements all IEPs in the school with fidelity (McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014). Principals who fail to exercise appropriate leadership in these matters can experience

negative professional consequences (McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014). In the *Kay Williams v. Cabell County Board of Education* (1996) court case (as cited in McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014), for example, the school district's Board of Education removed a principal for violating the confidentiality of students' IEPs and "for failing to:

- Take responsibility and administrative leadership.
- Ensure teachers implemented the IEP; and
- Cooperate with parents. (McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014, p. 2)

The research findings revealed that participants who were not as involved in special education delegated their responsibilities to a special education teacher, chairperson, special education coordinator, or assistant principal. Specific to policies and procedures, principals indicated priorities in professional development to focus on the IEP meeting process. (Christensen, Williamson, Hunter, 2013; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Lynch, 2012; Overturf, 2007).

The daily duties of a principal are dynamic and complex. Principals are expected to be knowledgeable and competent in numerous areas. They are responsible for maintaining a safe school, student discipline, communicating with parents, and providing instructional leadership (Fullan, 2002). In addition, they also must handle the complex area of special education by attending meetings, overseeing the implementation of IEPs, supervising special education teachers, and maintaining compliance with federal guidelines (IDEA, 2004). Being a principal requires a foundational understanding of special education law and policies. Principals do not have to be experts in special education knowledge, but that does not relinquish them from engaging in special

education. Still, principals must have a foundational understanding of the educational entitlements for special education students (DiPaola et al., 2004).

General education teachers lack preparedness and collaboration. Several of the principals spoke about the between general education and special education teachers. It was reported that general education teachers believed that only special education teachers are responsible for students with a disability. Gavish (2017) found that the general education teachers felt that special education students should not receive their education in general education classes. In addition, the general education teachers did not want to collaborate with the special education teachers. As reported in this study, the general education teachers were unprepared to teach special education students, and that principals were not always able to provide the teachers with the support they needed to teach the special education students.

Participants pointed out that general education and special education teachers working together helps build trust with the parents and students. Additionally, participants pointed out that if general and special education teachers follow the policies and procedures, there may be fewer problems for the district. The participants were aware that a change was required, but most did not offer specific strategies. Based on the current findings and the literature research undertaken in section one, elementary principals and their teachers need adequate help to implement special education effectively. Therefore, teachers need ongoing training throughout the school year. Jesteadt (2012) study found that training strengthened the skills of the teachers on how to handle students with disabilities receiving special education. Jesteadt (2012) added that

having trained teachers who understand students' needs improves their confidence and individual performances.

General education teachers need foundational knowledge as they typically refer students who may need to be evaluated for special education. Research has revealed that general education teachers often feel unprepared to meet special education students' academic and behavioral needs in general education look for training to improve their teaching (Lyons, Thompson, & Timmons, 2016). Most students in Salix receive special education services in general education classrooms. A general education teacher must be a part of developing a student's IEP under most circumstances. (deBettencort, 2002; Department of Education, 1999; IDEA, 2004). General education teachers' lack of special education knowledge can negatively affect the students. Students are more at risk of not improving academically when teachers do not know or receive the appropriate training (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian., 2013; Rozenwig, 2009). DeBettencort (2002) said, "We are doing a disservice to these teachers by not including in their preparation a clear understanding of the differences between Section 504 and IDEA" (p. 23).

The participants shared that improvement was needed with collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers. A major challenge with special education implementation, centered on a student's IEP, was the lack of collaboration and planning between general and special education teachers. General education teachers typically focus on the core curriculum, while special educators focus on instructional modifications documented on the IEP. Effective special education implementation for students in general education classrooms requires both general and special education teachers to know each other's role in supporting the student. To improve the

collaboration requires support from the principal (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). Principals must facilitate this by providing opportunities and scheduled time to review the students' special education and instructional needs. General and special education teachers need time to discuss and share instructional responsibilities to address individual student needs through ongoing and instructional planning (Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014). Principals indicated that a shift was needed with general education teachers' work with special education students. They noted a need to improve collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers for the changes to occur.

Recommendations for the School District

Results from this study continue to highlight the need for special education to be embedded into principal preparation and licensure programs to prepare them for the supervision of special education services adequately (Valesky & Hirth, 1992). The following recommendations are made based upon the findings of this study:

- **Enhance principal preparation licensure coursework and internship activities.** One way to close the gap between the lack of preparation in principal preparation programs is to revise coursework to better align with principals' responsibilities with special education. This course should include practical examples of administrative problems that principals might face in special education management.
- **Identify special education appraisal areas for principals of schools with historical patterns of special education non-compliance.** The Department of

Special Education, supervisors of principals, and principals should collaborate to identify one to two yearly special education goal areas, individualized to their schools' needs and demographic population, based on the district's APP/SPP target areas. For the district to meet the APP/SPP indicator targets, specific actions must occur at the school level and involve the principals. The identified goal is embedded in the principal's yearly appraisal and allows more targeted district accountability for schools that consistently do not follow federal, state, or district procedures. When principals understand their role and presence in special education, they will have the ability to prevent are of non-compliance.

- **Provide principals training in dealing with students with challenging behaviors.** A comprehensive, proactive support system is needed to “shape appropriate behaviors but also has the necessary steps and strategies for when a true crisis emerges.” The training should include documenting steps to remedy problems and how behavior management aligns with a student's IEP and behavior intervention. Training will help principals provide ongoing support and expectations for staff implementation. As principals receive training, they can work with their school-based crisis teams, schools with similar demographics, and IEP teams to proactively plan and implement positive behavioral supports and behavior intervention plans.
- **Identify a district-wide expectation for a principal's involvement in special education activities.** A cross-functional workgroup comprised of parents, principals, supervisors of principals, special education supervisors, general education teachers, and special education teachers can develop a uniform standard

for principal involvement with special education programs in their schools. These standards would be a product of the consensus of the cross-functional team.

These standards would apply to specific tasks and activities that promote elementary school principals' ideal level of involvement with special education programs. The adopted standards would be incorporated into the yearly appraisal. For example, define the expectations for principals' participation in various types of IEP meetings. Participants reported that their workload, competing priorities, was a barrier to active involvement in IEP meetings. Responses from principals indicated that they prioritized which meetings they attended, particularly when a parent expressed concern. Participation in IEP meetings will provide opportunities for principals to be connected to the special education process consistently. Participation will help principals know what decisions are being made for their students.

- **Increase the principals' opportunity to collaborate and partner with experienced principals to increase their experience and training.** One of the facilitators for effective implementation of special education identified in this study was previous experience and training. Many principals enter their roles lacking special education experience.
- **Train general education teachers.** As more and more students with disabilities are educated in neighborhood schools, the need exists for both general education and special education to work together closely to meet the needs of these students. There should be a focus on effective instructional strategies for students with disabilities and coteaching. Co-teaching training should be provided to all general

and special education teachers to foster communication, lesson planning, and implementation of IEPs. The principal is an important link in this process and must create those training opportunities.

- **Principal supervisors and the Department of Special Education should collaborate to identify principals doing well with special education implementation at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.** Providing the opportunity for principals to observe other district principals with special education experience who are actively involved in IEP meetings will allow a participant to observe and discuss how they manage their involvement and consistently participate with a peer. Recommendations to increase the collaboration are:

- Provide a structure or system so principals or assistant principals can observe a model principal with a focus on the following activities:
 - Implementing a schedule to review an IEP for an upcoming meeting
 - Establishing pre-meetings for IEP meetings.
 - Parent engagement beyond IEP meetings attendance.
 - Conducting teacher observations of special education and general education teachers for evidence of specially designed instruction.

Implications of the Study

The findings in this study are consistent with the results of previous studies in the field, which indicated a lack of educational training and preparation in special education

for school leaders. These findings support the prior research of DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003), who found “most principals lack the course work and field experience needed to lead local efforts to create learning environments that emphasize academic success for students with disabilities” (p. 11). Gaps in training regarding special education policies and procedures further confirm that the principals lack special education preparation. Additionally, findings from this study reflect extensive research (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Wakeman et al., 2007) that reveals dissonance between what education leadership preparation programs are providing future school leaders and the knowledge they will need for the demands of the job.

The current study's findings imply that having more special education experiences embedded in administrative leadership training programs and hiring special education principals will improve elementary schools' special education efficiency. There is a need to train both principals and teachers on how best to attend to special education students. Despite more than thirty years of research indicating a need to align licensure and administrator preparation programs, this study highlighted the gaps that continue to exist (Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Zirkel, 2015). Findings indicate that administrators will continue to be less effective as a leader for special education programming without further training and education on special education programming.

Limitations

The current research study had ten elementary principals. The respondents included principals of traditional elementary schools in the district. This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the participants were interviewed virtually from

their homes versus their work location or in person with the researcher. Therefore, its generalizability to other contexts and areas was not possible. Future researchers should explore the same research topic using a larger sample size from several schools across the country. Larger sample sizes from several schools will deliver results that do not significantly deviate from the actual situation. Future studies should focus on how principals apply professional development regarding instructional and behavior guidance for increasing IEP implementation and positive behavior supports provided by staff in the general education classroom and examining school-based versus systemic professional development.

Appendices

Appendix A. IRB Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

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TEL: 301.405.4212
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DATE: November 15, 2019

TO: Tameka Wright

FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1518665-1] Examining Elementary Principals' Involvement, Perceived Barriers and Supports Needed for Special Education

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: November 15, 2019

EXPIRATION DATE: November 14, 2020

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to submission to the IRB Office, this project received scientific review from the departmental IRB Liaison.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of November 14, 2020.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of seven years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or irb@umd.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

1204 Moore Mount Hall
College Park, MD 20742-0125
TEL: 301.405.4212
FAX: 301.314.1475
irb@um.edu
www.umresearchand.edu/IRB

DATE: March 24, 2020

TO: Tameka Wright

FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1518665-2] Examining Elementary Principals' Involvement, Perceived Barriers and Supports Needed for Special Education

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 24, 2020

EXPIRATION DATE: November 14, 2020

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to submission to the IRB Office, this project received scientific review from the departmental IRB Liaison.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of November 14, 2020.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of seven years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or irb@umd.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

Appendix B. District Approval

March 18, 2020

Tameka Wright

Dear Ms. Wright:

The review of your request to conduct the research entitled "Examining Elementary Principals' Involvement, Perceived Barriers and Supports Needed for Special Education" has been completed. Based on the examination, I am pleased to inform you that the Department of Testing, Research and Evaluation has granted authorization for you to proceed with your study.

This approval applies to the 2019-2020 school year. We reserve the right to withdraw approval at any time or decline to extend the approval if the implementation of your study adversely impacts any of the school district's activities. If you are not able to complete your data collection during this period, you must submit a request for an extension through the Department of Testing, Research and Evaluation's online tool located on our website. You will be required to submit a status report of your study, any changes to your procedures and methods, and all appropriate consent forms and instruments.

Prior to your data collection activities, you are required to secure written approval of the principals where you plan to recruit your research subjects. The Principal Permission to Conduct Research Study forms must be signed and forwarded to my attention and a copy given to the respective principal. Regarding the recruitment materials, please be aware that only approved copies (stamped 'APPROVED') can be distributed to your target subjects or distributed in schools from which you plan to recruit research subjects. The wording of the consent forms must be exactly as the version submitted to our office. Should you change the procedure or materials, any revisions must be approved by this office before being used in this study. Please be aware that participation in your project is on a strictly voluntary basis.

An abstract and one copy of your study's final report should be forwarded to the Department of Testing, Research & Evaluation within one month of successful completion of your study. Do not hesitate to contact the Research and Evaluation office if you have any questions. I wish you success in your study.

Best regards,

Appendix C. Recruitment Email

Dear Principal,

My name is Tameka Wright, and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Maryland. This email is part of the recruitment process for dissertation research. You are being considered for this study because you are an elementary principal. I am seeking elementary principals such as yourself who would be interested in sharing their involvement in special education, challenges or barriers with special education, and the types of supports elementary principals report they need to implement special education.

The data collection process for the study will be through face-to-face interviews conducted in a location of your choosing. The selected location should have limited background noise and location where you can participate in the interview uninterrupted. The interview is expected to last no longer than one hour and would be arranged at a time convenient to your schedule. Involvement in this interview is entirely voluntary, and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.

I would like to thank you in advance for considering participating in the study. Please respond to this email if you are interested in participating. I will then contact you to set up a time to obtain written consent to participate and select a date and time for the interview. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions you do not wish to answer and may terminate the interview at any time. With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded to facilitate the collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. You will receive a summary of your interview. All information you provide

will be considered confidential. If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please feel free to contact Dr. Margaret McLaughlin at (301) 405-2337. The final decision about participation is yours. I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board and the school district's Office of Testing, Research, and Evaluation. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the irb@umd.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding your participation. Please respond if you are interested so that we can set up a time to discuss the study, provide written consent to participate in the study and schedule an interview time. Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Tameka Wright

Appendix D. Follow up Recruitment Email

Dear Principal,

My name is Tameka Wright, and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Maryland. I recently sent a request for your participation in my study. I am conducting a study for my dissertation based upon interviews with elementary principals to examine elementary principals' involvement in special education. The purpose of this study is to explore elementary principals' involvement, challenges or barriers with special education, and the types of supports elementary principals report they need to implement special education. Understanding the experiences of elementary principals is important due to the federal and state requirements, the number of special education students, and more empowered parents who obtain attorneys and advocates. Participants will be expected to attend an individual interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

If you are interested in speaking with me, please respond to this email. If you are interested so that we can set up a time to obtain consent to participate in the study and schedule an interview time. Thank you once again for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Tameka Wright

Appendix E. Informed Consent Form



Initials: _____ Date: _____

Institutional Review Board
 1224 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-485-6212 • irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	Examining Elementary Principals' Involvement, Perceived Barriers and Supports Needed for Special Education
Purpose of the Study	<p>This research is being conducted by Tameka Wright at the University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Dr. Margaret McLaughlin as part of her dissertation. You are being invited to participate in this research project because you are an elementary principal and you were the principal of the school during the 2018-2019 school year.</p> <p>The purpose of the proposed study is to investigate what elementary principals' report about their involvement in the implementation of IDEA. The study will examine elementary principals' reported involvement in the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), examine elementary principals' challenges with IDEA implementation, and identify the types of supports elementary principals report they need to implement the IDEA effectively. The results of the proposed study can be used by district leaders to develop professional development that will assist current and future principals with increasing their level of special education involvement in order to improve behavioral and academic outcomes for students with disabilities in their schools, least restrictive environment percentages for students accessing instruction in general education, and their own decision-making concerning special education.</p>
Procedures	<p>Your participation in this study requires a two-way live virtual interview during which you will be asked questions about your professional educational experiences, involvement with special education, and how you might respond to short scenarios.</p> <p>With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped and transcribed, the purpose is to capture and maintain an accurate record of the discussion. The data recorded for response clarity and to assure the accurate analysis of data when reporting the findings of this study. Any audio recordings transcribe will be made available for your review, ensuring the accuracy of the transcription. Your name will not be used at all. On all transcripts and data collected, you will be referred to only by way of an alphanumeric code.</p> <p>Example of Interview question Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe what special education services look like in your school.

Initials: _____ Date: _____

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a special education student exhibiting aggressive and challenging behaviors. Several parents request that the student immediately be transferred out of the classroom or place their children in another classroom. If the request is not granted, the parents plan to contact the Board of Education.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	Answering questions about your experience and involvement with special education can be difficult. The interviewer has experience working with principals. This can be improved through the interview between the researcher and participant, reiterating confidentiality between participants, with the researcher, and with the content of the interview. You may skip any question or end the interview at any time.
Potential Benefits	Participants may benefit from this study because the research is relevant to their roles as principals. You may benefit from this study through opportunities to reflect on the practices taking place at your school. Your participation in this study benefits the field of principal training and development. The results of this study will inform the field with respect to the reported experiences of elementary principals in special education and the exploration of professional supports for principals. The possible improvement of principals' involvement regarding special education which may directly benefit teachers who instruct students receiving special education and the parents of the students.
Confidentiality	<p>Your answers will be confidential. No one will know how you answered any of the questions. To keep this information safe, the copy of your responses will be stored securely on a computer that is password-protected. To protect confidentiality, your real name will not be used in the written copy of the discussion. You will be assigned an alphanumeric code. The researcher will have sole access to the data and reports including information shared with the University of Maryland community or the general public will contain a summary of responses without the identification of any one participant ensuring anonymity of response data. These data will be destroyed after three years. Any paper forms will be shredded and all digital data will be erased permanently from all devices. All of the data and forms will be stored within the researcher's home office in a locked file cabinet. Participants will be given a copy of their signed forms, so they can keep them for their own records.</p> <p>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this

Initials: _____ Date: _____

	<p>research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tameka Wright Twright9@umd.edu 240-515-4704</p>	
Participant Rights	<p>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p>For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants</p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</p>	
Statement of Consent	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT (Please Print)	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	



Appendix F. Mapping Interview Questions to Research Questions

Mapping Interview Questions to Research Questions

Interview Question	Research Question Alignment
1. Please tell me your position, areas of certification, and years of experience as a principal.	Demographic Question
2. What was your work experience before becoming an elementary school principal at your current school?	Demographic Question
3. Tell me about the special education training you received since becoming a principal.	Demographic Question
4. Describe what special education services look like in your school.	Research Question 2
5. Estimate how many school hours a week you spend on issues relating to special education.	Research Question 1
6. If you are not able to attend every IEP meeting, whom do you assign to be your designee and why?	Research Question 3
7. Do you delegate any other special education tasks to other staff in the school? Tell me how you delegate those tasks?	Research Question 3
8. Tell me about how the IEP meeting calendar is managed and approved in your school?	Research Question 1
9. What do you feel most comfortable and least comfortable with when it comes to special education?	Research Question 2
10. Scenario 1: Several parents complain to you that the IEP team is not providing the required paperwork before or after IEP meetings within the required timelines. Describe how you would respond to the situation.	Research Question 1, 2, and 3
11. Scenario 2: There is a special education student exhibiting aggressive and challenging behaviors. Several parents request that the student be immediately transferred out of the classroom or that their children be placed in another classroom. If the request is not granted, the parents plan to contact the Board of Education. Describe how you responded or would respond to the situation?	Research Question 1, 2, and 3
12. Scenario 3: A general education teacher expressed concern about a student's special education services. The teacher feels the student requires a change in placement because of his disability code and lack of progress. Describe how you responded or would respond to the situation.	Research Question 1,2, and 3
13. Scenario 4: 13A teacher referred a student to the School Instructional Team (SIT). The SIT recommended that the teacher implement some additional strategies. The parent disagrees with the recommendations and refers the child for special education evaluation. The IEP team met and determined that the student was making progress and did not suspect that the student had a disability. After the IEP meeting, the parent shares with you that she is in disagreement with the decision and plans to hire an attorney	Research Question 1,2, and 3

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