

Academy Breaks the Isolation of Special Education Directors

School-district special education directors routinely juggle complex, difficult, time-consuming, and emotion-laden job demands, but when things get tough, they usually find themselves solving problems on their own.

“Special education administration is a difficult and isolating job,” says Susan Marks. “Between the heavy daily workload and the fact that they don’t have regular contact with their professional peers, special education directors don’t get the chance to compare notes, discuss strategies, or toss around ideas with other people who understand the job.”

Marks is part of a long-standing and successful initiative to address this issue. Since 2011, she has co-directed the Special Education Leadership Academy in Massachusetts, which, for the past decade, has been offered to experienced special education directors in the state by WestEd’s Learning Innovations program. Funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) and free to participants, the Academy aims to build directors’ capacities to do their jobs effectively and minimize burnout. In fact, a major reason that MA DESE funds the Academy is to retain veteran directors in their positions longer, so that students and educators—especially those coming up through the special education ranks—can benefit from their knowledge and experience.

Citing the Academy’s ten-year track record, Marks credits it with helping special education directors “feel more empowered,” and improving the likelihood that they stay on the job. Patricia Bullard, director of Pupil Personnel Services for the Masconomet Regional School District in Topsfield, Massachusetts, agrees. Bullard, a 2011 graduate of the Academy, says that the opportunity to “meet, establish relationships with, and learn from” her peers is its best feature. Describing the Academy as “rejuvenating,” Bullard adds that participants establish support networks that continue long after the Academy ends.

A Day in the Life

A special education director’s job description includes a somewhat unusual, complex mix of responsibilities. Like other district-level personnel with administrative responsibilities at school sites, a special education director supervises a districtwide group of teachers, paraprofessionals, and other support personnel, and oversees programs, services, and practices. Additionally, a special education director’s job involves implementing the myriad provisions of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a 1975 law mandating that students with disabilities receive

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a “free and appropriate” education in the “least restrictive environment” and are “educated with non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible.”

A key provision of IDEA is that an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each special education student must be developed and monitored. “That responsibility alone means special education directors have a lot of contact with parents regarding education services for their children and participate, in some cases, in difficult and emotional IEP meetings,” says Marks. “As a result of the legal mandate, special education directors are much more likely to be involved in administrative hearings and litigation than their general education peers.”

Because IDEA also calls for special education students to have access to general education curriculum and instruction, special education directors must work not only with special education teachers and paraprofessionals, but also with general education classroom teachers and other school and district-level administrators. Also, district compliance with provisions of IDEA and with state special education rules and regulations requires a massive amount of documentation, much of which must be submitted to federal and state officials. Marks notes that ensuring this compliance is very time-consuming for special education directors and that it takes time away from program-related activities.

Updating Critical Knowledge and Promoting Peer Connections

The Academy is open to special education administrators with five or more years of experience in a Massachusetts public school district, charter school, or regional collaborative serving multiple districts. It runs for three and a half days in August, followed by three additional full-day follow-up sessions later in the school year, plus annual two-day follow-up seminars (“reunions”) for prior Academy participants. All participants can receive continuing-education credit, including graduate-level credit.

According to Marks, annual attendance at the Academy averages between 15 and 20 participants from throughout Massachusetts. Highly interactive sessions cover a broad range of issues, such as leadership skills; system changes; staff recruitment, retention, and development; program evaluation; and data collection and analysis. Marks, who has worked as an attorney specializing in special education issues, typically updates participants on legal issues related to special education and leads discussions on recent cases that could affect directors’ work. She also teaches conflict resolution strategies: “Conflict resolution is a big issue in special education,” she notes.

The Academy requires that participants complete individual projects, and gives them time for this project work. For example, a special education director might design and plan a year-long professional development program for paraprofessionals working in his or her department. “Often, paraprofessionals get little or no [professional development],” says Marks, “despite the fact that they are often the ones working directly with the students with the greatest needs.” Another participant might choose to design a teacher evaluation system, a task recently made more complex by federal and state requirements to link teacher evaluation with student performance. Notes Marks: “This [linkage] can be a problem for special education teachers, whose students may not perform as well on standardized tests.”

While working in the North Reading School District and attending the Academy, Bullard tackled a project that involved expanding a co-teaching model, in which special education and content-area teachers worked side by side in classrooms including regular education and special education



students, to all five schools in her district. Such innovative local projects, Marks says, are difficult, if not impossible, for special education directors to tackle while mired in the day-to-day demands of their jobs. “We provide them with a project-planning template, a process to use, and time to talk with us and each other about what their project is going to look like.”

During the Academy’s evening sessions, participants have time to share with peers the details of successful projects, or copies of effective materials that they have developed in the past. “I can’t overemphasize how valuable it is for these special education directors to have a chance to interact,” says Marks. “We provide the structure, setting, and a lot of information, but what they learn from each other is particularly valuable.”

Academy graduates echo Marks’s observations. In fact, 100 percent of those polled in a recent survey say they would recommend participation to a colleague. “When I have a question that stumps me,” Bullard notes, “I put it out there to my peers I’ve met at the Academy, and I know a good portion will respond.” Learning Innovations maintains an email list to facilitate communication among Academy participants.

Bullard also appreciates that “prior to the Academy participants are asked: What are your biggest issues? What do you want addressed?” Customizing Academy programs to meet the needs of a specific group of special education directors is invaluable, Bullard says, particularly in managing current “hot topics” such as transition planning for students with disabilities who have completed high school and are ready to move to a postsecondary educational setting or a career.

Investing in the Future

WestEd’s Learning Innovations program is also home to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs’ Northeast Regional Resource Center. Center Director Kristin Reedy says the Academy is one way in which the program is working to accomplish an even broader goal: to bridge gaps between special and general education. “One of our major themes,” she says, “is to find ways to help special education directors work with their counterparts in general education to help develop school systems that are more inclusive and responsive to all students.”

Reedy notes that many special education directors are at or near retirement age, which makes learning and networking opportunities such as those provided by the Academy particularly important. In some cases, the Academy has convinced directors to stay on the job a bit longer, which Reedy appreciates. “Individuals now working in these positions of leadership began their careers in the 1970s and remember what conditions were like for kids with disabilities prior to the enactment of IDEA,” she says. “Their perspective is valuable and may be lost unless we continue to support leaders in special education in ways that not only remind them of the gains that have been made but also help them remain vigilant about the work we still have to do.”

According to Reedy, although programs similar to the Academy are offered in some other states, through universities and professional organizations, “it’s safe to assume there remains a critical need, among currently practicing special education directors at the local level, for such opportunities. WestEd is helping to meet that need.”

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