

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODULES FOR
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS:
A TOOL FOR CREATING AND SUSTAINING SUPPORTIVE
SCHOOL CULTURES FOR ALL STUDENTS

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School administrators and principals, in particular, play a key role in establishing and cultivating a school climate that supports all students, including those with significant developmental disabilities. In order to facilitate this, they need to be familiar with the principles of best practice related to instruction, assessment and accountability, and other school-based activities. Although they receive some training in this area during their principalship preparation, they rarely have the opportunity to explore relevant issues in a comprehensive fashion. In addition, intensive, focused support is rarely available to them when they are in midst of a time-sensitive situation in their schools.

Recognizing this need, East Carolina University instituted the North Carolina Principals' Leadership Center to offer all North Carolina principals this opportunity. In this article, we share our experiences with the development of computer-based training modules that allow users to explore multiple perspectives of an issue in a format that allows access to critical information needed to make effective decisions. These modules provide content

knowledge that reflects the complexities of the real world using a learning strategy that is particularly well suited to the ill-structured problems facing principals. Although these modules focused on students with significant developmental disabilities, the idea of online training modules with multiple perspectives that reflect real-world complexities could be used in many areas of professional development. School districts could offer these modules to assistant principals and newly inducted principals as a way of introducing them to the complexities that surround students with significant developmental disabilities.

In developing the modules, a great deal of time was spent in analysis of the audience and the content prior to design and development. The final stage of development included pilot testing prior to full implementation. A team approach, using instructional designers and content experts was employed in the development of the training.

Analysis

Prior to development, an analysis of the problem looked at the legal and pedagogical issues surrounding inclusion of all students in our North Carolina schools, the difficulties facing principals in particular, and the delivery method most appropriate for this professional development. We determined that only through a clear understanding of the audience and their particular concerns, constraints, and information needs would an effective program be developed.

The Problem

Our educational community is going through a period unlike any before. Individuals with disabilities and their advocates are pressing change to create schools that welcome and support all children including those with disabilities and those with the most significant developmental disabilities. The school accountability movement is also calling for inclusion of all students in assessment and accountability systems to ensure improved outcomes for all students (see sidebar for more details).

The Audience

For the first time, many school administrators are directly charged with the responsibility of creating a school culture that encourages and facilitates the inclusion of all students including those with significant developmental disabilities. However, many principals lack knowledge of special education, students with disabilities, and laws that apply to these populations. A number of studies have documented insufficient principal training in special education (Aspen, 1992; Lowe & Brigham, 2000; Stephens & Joseph, 1995).

To be an effective instructional leader, the principal should have an adequate knowledge base in instructional best practices for special education students. That knowledge base must be continuously updated and accessible as the courts and federal government rewrite the laws governing programs for students with disabilities. In addition they must supply the instructional leadership to influence every component of the special education process. Yet, principals are pressed for time. In addition, they often need immediate information when they are in the midst of a time-sensitive situation in their schools. Given the wide-spread audience of principals in need, the issue of answering immediate concerns, the requirement to be continually updated as information becomes available, and the shortage of time for administrators, a web-based professional development opportunity was agreed upon. This would allow principals to experience professional development in this area at a time that was convenient to them. Given the varied technical skills of the target audience, however, a simple interface would be necessary.

The Content

Not surprisingly, principals are seeking assistance. One study reported that over 85% of the principals stated more formal training in special education was needed and 40% had received no training (Asperdon, 1992). Few state principal licensure programs require principals to possess knowledge of special education law (Kaye, 2000). Most often cited is the need for increased understanding of special education law and implications for implementa-

tion (McFadden, Mobley, Burnham, Joyner & Peel, 2003), school reform to include all students (McLaughlin, Warren & Schofield, 1999), access to the general curriculum (Warren, 2000), and ongoing locally-driven professional development specifically aimed at school administrators (Asperdon, 1992; Hirth & Valesky, 1991). Principals have reported that specific coursework in administration and supervision of services for students with learning disabilities would be beneficial to their job performance (Davidson & Gooden, 2001). More recently, McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) identified five principles critical for all school administrators to know and understand including legal foundation/entitlements, matching instruction to specific students with disabilities, understanding that special education is not a place nor a program, understanding how to meaningfully include students with disabilities in assessments and new accountability systems, and creating school-wide conditions that support effective special education.

Design

While the above information is a review of national trends, state trends are similar. The North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities recognized the need to address these issues and developed a 2004 programmatic and funding educational initiative. This initiative contained three components: conduct a two-day symposium to address current issues in education affecting students with developmental disabilities in the state, engage principals across the state as partners in inclusion, and support innovative education practices at the school and classroom level. The North Carolina Principals' Leadership Center was funded to address the second initiative.

The goals of the Center are to help principals and other school administrators identify, implement, and disseminate policies and best practices essential to the meaningful participation of students with significant developmental disabilities in the general curriculum. The Center targets every public principal and school administrator (i.e., traditional public schools and charter schools) throughout the state of North Carolina. Center resources have been developed for principals with a wide range of needs and aware-

ness/sophistication levels. One of those resources is a series of interactive training modules.

Training Modules

The content for the modules was developed collaboratively by the project staff consisting of faculty from the Department of Curriculum Instruction–Special Education, Department of Educational Leadership, and Department of Librarianship, Educational Technology and Distance Instruction at East Carolina University. In order for the content to be relevant to the needs of school administrators, the project staff solicited information from four special interest groups: community members (parents and family members of children with significant developmental disabilities), public school personnel (regular and special education teachers, school administrators, central office administrators), faculty and administrators from schools, colleges, and department of education and state level employees in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Association of School Administrators. This information was obtained over a three month period during the planning stage of the project. The project team also conducted focus groups at state conferences as well as various regional and local conferences and meetings.

The training modules focus on individual students with significant developmental disabilities who can benefit from effective school leadership from their principals. Each module offers principals an opportunity to examine a particular situation, consider legal implications, and explore options for school-wide practices that will benefit all students and faculty. At the heart of the training modules are nine cases. In each case, a written description of the scenario is provided to make evident the rich context in which the case exists. Accompanying each case are two to three perspectives which provide additional information and insight into each case as well as emphasizing the multiple perspectives of each case. Specific individuals, such as a parent, principal, teacher, attorney, student, or classmate, offer their viewpoint on the particular case. Linked directly to the case, a user can access information on a specific school law that corresponds to it. Also directly linked from

the case, are specific strategies that can be employed to increase inclusion of the student.

While each case provides information on a particular student and the details of that case, no student exists in a vacuum; the environment of the school must also be considered. Therefore, linked to each case is background information where users can access specific data corresponding to each school described in the individual cases. They can access data about students such as gender, racial composition of students, percentage of high school graduates, average SAT scores, and the percentages of limited English proficient students and exceptional children in the school. Student performance on state tests and the average class size is also reported in this section. Additionally, school administrators can obtain demographic information about teachers at a particular school such as the percentages of certified teachers, teachers with advanced degrees, teachers with less than three years, four to ten years and more than ten years of teaching experience. Finally, county demographic information such as the percentage of unemployed residents, the median income, and the percentage of county residents who have a bachelor's degree and/or advanced degrees can also be accessed in this section. This information is provided to again demonstrate the complex nature of these cases and to provide data that may help a user to identify more closely with the situation under view.

Finally, there is opportunity for further study through a discussion section which includes probing questions that encourage the user to reflect on each case. In this section, users respond to three types of questions, including comprehension, application, and evaluation. There is also an opportunity for users to react to additional content and questions posed about the original case scenario. Users are also asked to compare the content in a case scenario with their own school environment. Finally, users are asked to employ and apply a particular concept or issue originally posed in a particular case scenario.

Development

Each of the cases are real-world situations taken from local schools; care was taken to mask the identities of the individuals

involved. In addition to the cases, a “help” section and links to additional resources were provided to encourage exploration of additional information for the specific disabilities described in the cases.

After the initial prototype was developed, a pilot test was conducted with school and state personnel such as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators to evaluate its usability and usefulness. Many of the participants were likely users of the program. Likert scale ratings as well as open-ended comments were collected. Descriptive statistics were run on the responses of the participants (n=40). Results were overwhelmingly positive as to content provided, program usability, and need for the modules. The pilot test was also used to collect information about ideas for future module topics.

Conclusions

The need for school administrators and principals to learn about establishing and cultivating a school climate that supports all students, including those with significant developmental disabilities, is a reality. The development of online training modules that allow users to explore multiple perspectives of an issue in a flexible format was explored here with positive results. The modules use uncomplicated technology to provide content knowledge that reflects the complexities of the real world making it particularly well suited to the ill-structured problems facing principals. The team approach of using content experts in educational technology, educational leadership, and special education led to the development of a rich learning environment that none of the members would have been able to develop individually. Although these modules focused on students with significant developmental disabilities, the idea of online training modules with multiple perspectives that reflect real-world complexities could be used in many areas of professional development. The modules are available online at <http://www.ecu.edu/cs-educ/nc-plc/index.cfm> or interested parties can request a CD-ROM from the authors.

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