

# Special Education Administrator

Making **A**

**DIFFERENCE** in the **lives** of **students** with **special needs**

**A** seven-year-old girl with autism is new to the school system and is enrolled in a second-grade class. The classroom teacher, who has no aide or assistant, is very concerned because the girl does not speak and seldom follows directions. The teacher says the girl is overwhelmed. By spending a disproportionate amount of classroom time helping one student, the teacher believes she cannot give adequate attention to her general education students and to the classroom's other special needs students. The girl's parents are pleased with their daughter's progress and want her to remain in the class.

In a class comprised entirely of special education students in middle school, one child is consistently making cruel remarks about his classmates. The student has even played harmful pranks at their expense. The teacher has met with the child and discussed the unacceptable behavior, but nothing has changed. One parent is so angry that he wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper about the abusive incidents. Without contacting the school or the teacher to verify the information, the newspaper published the letter.

The school board in one city has severe budget problems for next year, partly caused by unexpected population growth in one part of the school district. The board says it cannot afford to purchase more specially equipped school buses to transport students who use wheelchairs. "We're sorry, but those families will



## C A R E E R S

in Special  
**E**ducation  
and Related **S**ervices

just have to drive their children to school next year," stated the school board treasurer in a recent meeting.

Which member of the special education staff is responsible for solving these difficult issues? The special education administrator. These administrators supervise their schools' (or school system's) special education program for hundreds or thousands of students.

Today, to comply with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all schools that receive public funding must provide special education services to students with disabilities. During 1997-98 school year, there were 5,972,341 children (ages 3-21) who received special education services. Special education administrators are usually very knowledgeable about the needs of their students and how the school system can help them.

## Nature of Work

**Special education administrators** hold executive positions with broad, demanding duties. They:

- Determine educational standards and goals for special education programs.
- Ensure that those programs comply with federal, state, and local laws.
- Set policies and procedures for special education teachers and staff who are implementing those programs.
- Motivate teachers and staff.
- Provide parents with regular reports on their child's progress.
- Review and evaluate all programs—pilot programs, long-term programs, future programs.
- Write grants, prepare budgets.
- Respond to legislative questions and concerns.
- Mediate disputes between parents and schools.
- Attend community meetings when critical special education issues are discussed.

Unlike **speech-language pathologists** or occupational therapists or school nurses—who treat specific needs with well-defined services—special education administrators make decisions about complex issues that touch every aspect of a school's or district's special education program. Furthermore, they are generally much more involved with parents than are other school administrators.

“Parents of special education children tend to develop very strong advocacy skills,” says one mother whose child received special education services for more than ten years. “At the same time, special education administrators are managing finite resources. Unfortunately, no school system can implement a near-perfect program for each child. As a result, there is a natural tension between parents and the special education team.”

To resolve the sample problems described above, special education administrators make decisions based on information provided by multiple sources: parents, teachers, other administrators, the school board and community organizations.

Before making a decision about the second-grade class, a special education administrator might dispatch a team to observe the class, review the progress of the child with autism, and then reach an agreement with the children's parents and teacher. Perhaps an assistant teacher or aide would be hired. For the middle school class, a special education administrator might consider a parent's suggestion that a guest (maybe a psychologist, counselor, or adapted physical education teacher) teach

a short unit about cooperation and teamwork. The bus issue may be the easiest to resolve because special education administrators understand the complex federal laws that apply to students with disabilities. With a phone call, a special education administrator may be the person who informs the school board that the treasurer's recent statement is not legally enforceable.

Although **special education administrators** are not routinely involved in every student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), they are responsible for staying informed about the overall acceptance rate of IEP's in their schools. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, parents reject their child's IEP. (One populous state had 98 percent of its IEPs accepted by parents, but the 2 percent that were rejected totaled more than 3,000 IEPs.) When parents dispute the IEP, a hearing is required at either the local or the state level. Special education administrators can be instrumental in the mediation process. Helping students succeed in school is their chief goal.

## Education Required

As one career book stated, “Education administration is not usually an entry-level job...workers must first prove themselves in their current jobs.” Most schools or districts require a master's degree and appropriate state licensure as the minimum standard for hiring special education administrators. Some schools or districts require a doctorate degree.

**Special education administrators** typically have a bachelor's degree in education, child development, or nursing, and a master's or a doctorate degree in special education, a related field or administration.





## Laura Clark, Ph.D

### Director of Special Education Kansas City, Kansas

Dr. Laura Clark is director of special education for the Wyandotte Special Education Cooperative. The Cooperative provides services for 4,300 special education students, birth to age 21, in three school districts. Dr. Clark's first job after college was teaching history in middle school. "Two of my students had learning disabilities," she recalled, "and I became intrigued with how their disorders affected learning." The following year she went back to school and began graduate studies. There she earned a master's degree in learning disabilities and behavior disorders, and a doctor of philosophy degree in special education administration. Before assuming her current position, Dr. Clark taught secondary special education for six years.

"Being a special education administrator in a school system that serves thousands of children," said Dr. Clark, "is sometimes like walking a tightrope. Funding special education is usually a public relations nightmare. Parents of children who are receiving special services say the school's not doing enough. Parents of children who don't need special education services say the school does too much or spends too much on the program," she said. Responding to both groups of taxpayers occupies a large portion of Dr. Clark's time.

Four evenings every year, Dr. Clark meets with parents whose children are receiving special education services. "For two hours, they fire questions at me about their child's education. I'm the only one who answers. I'm a mother of two, and one receives special education services, so I do empathize with parents' concerns," she said.

**Daily Schedule:** No two days are the same, but several activities are constant in Dr. Clark's schedule:

*"I truly believe I have an impact  
on children and families"*

1. She meets weekly with her management staff to review minor problems.
2. She attends monthly board of education meetings and is prepared to discuss topics such as hiring additional staff, pilot projects, grants, budgets, and innovative programs.
3. She participates in monthly department meetings where staff report on the status of services being delivered in the district.

"There's a huge amount of reading required in this job in order to stay current with local and national issues in special education," remarked Dr. Clark. "Not only do I need to know what's happening with the teachers in our system, but I also am expected to be the expert in community issues involving special education. I meet with various boards and agencies to discuss concerns, such as student immunizations, child care before and after school hours, and summer vacation opportunities for our students. Because special education is a relatively new field and is still emerging, administrators like myself often have to make judgment calls. A clear understanding of the law helps."

"Administrators must have a desire to understand the law and regulations affecting special education," stressed Dr. Clark. "Carefully studying the fine print of legislation is tedious and time-consuming, but one person really can have an impact in a school system if he or she understands the federal laws."

**Challenges:** "My greatest challenge is handling difficult cases where children have complex challenges to overcome. I am proud that not one case has gone to court. We've settled them through mediation. Mediation is time-consuming; and change comes slowly, however. I wish we could accomplish more—quickly."

**Satisfaction:** "I truly believe I have an impact on children and families. By my actions, I can make their lives smoother and a bit easier. When I write a grant or implement a program, I know how it will have a positive effect on the kids. I think I am also a strong and positive advocate for teachers. I know if teachers aren't happy, their students won't progress at the rate they are able. It's gratifying to see the effects of sound decisions years later. Some former students keep in touch with me and share good news about their jobs and personal lives."



## Personal Qualities

Special education administrators are confident, articulate, innovative leaders who can motivate teachers and inspire trust. They have excellent management skills, they are detail-oriented, and they can handle high levels of stress in a demanding job that frequently requires overtime work. These administrators have strong interpersonal skills and a willingness to resolve conflicts on many levels.

## Job Outlook and Advancement

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 14,998 fully licensed special education administrators were employed in the 1996-97 school year. An additional 230 funded positions remained unfilled that year. The term "administrator" is interpreted widely, however, because school systems nationwide use different titles for special education administrators. Typical titles are director, supervisor, special education principal, and coordinator.

Employment of special education administrators is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2005. Because school faculty size is determined primarily by state and local funding, some school systems will restructure or eliminate administrative positions, while other school systems will increase the number of administrative jobs.

## How to Prepare for a Career

High school students can gain leadership skills by being active and assuming officer positions in school clubs and organizations. Aspiring school administrators should be academically strong and also be genuinely interested in helping others. Volunteer to work in children's programs, summer recreation camps, or Special Olympics. Ask your school principal or special education administrator if you qualify for any volunteer tutoring opportunities with children who are receiving special education services. Attend your community's school board meetings and special hearings, especially those where issues, such as school curriculum, special education services, budgets, and enrollment will be discussed.

When planning your course schedule, include as many English, communications, speech, and business classes as permitted. Learn problem-solving skills through classroom committee assignments and serve on a student mediation team.

## RESOURCES

### American Association of School Administrators

1801 N. Moore Street  
Arlington, VA 22209  
800-771-1162  
703-528-0700  
[www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org)

### The Council of Administrators of Special Education

615 16th Street, NW  
Albuquerque, NM 87104  
505-243-7622  
[members.aol.com/casecec/](http://members.aol.com/casecec/)

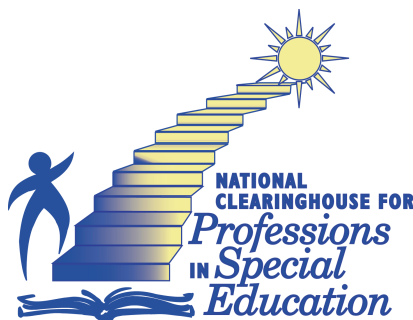
### The Council for Exceptional Children

1110 N. Glebe Road, Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201-5704  
800-224-6830  
866-915-5000 TTY  
[www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)



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