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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes results of a survey of special educators regarding first, their working conditions related to central office support and, second, the impact of administrative support on their job satisfaction, commitment, and intent to leave. Major findings regarding teacher attitudes toward central office administrators include a perceived administrative distance with a sense of being managed from a distance and a lack of proactive assistance and a perceived dissonance in priorities and values between teachers and central office administrators. Suggested directions for improving the central office-teacher relationship include expanding opportunities for meaningful and relevant information exchange between central office staff and teachers and expanding opportunities for professional development and learning. The second section of the report notes that teacher attitudes toward building support and central office support were not often highly correlated. It stresses the importance teachers gave to the role of the on-site administrator, the principal, both positively and negatively. Additionally, many special educators reported that they do not feel included in their schools. The suggested directions for improving the teacher/ administrator relationships mentioned above are reaffirmed. (DB)

Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions:

Problems Relating to Central Office Support

[and] Section 2: Administrative Support

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Paper presented at National Dissemination Forum on Issues Relating to Special Education Teacher Satisfaction, Retention, and Attrition

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Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions: Problems Related to Central Office Support

In each of the districts, teacher satisfaction, commitment, and intent to leave were all highly associated with administrative support. Interestingly, however, building support and central office support were not often highly correlated with each other. In one district, the correlation was low as .28, suggesting that teachers experience these two sources of support in distinct ways.

The following summarizes major findings relating to teachers perceptions of *central office support*.

Perceived Administrative Distance

Many teachers perceive that central office administrators do not adequately understand and/or value what teachers do in their jobs on a daily basis. Negative perceptions are exacerbated by limited contact. Some teachers reported that, after several years of employment, they had not even met many key central office staff.

Lack of contact with higher level administration was problematic largely because teachers believed that judgments or decisions were being made about their work that were not adequately informed. In one district, only 30% felt the special education department understood their jobs well, and 32% *not at all*. This sense of being *managed from a distance* left many teachers feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and powerless to effect change. As one teacher put it:

> "Special education teachers' hands are tied, they can do nothing, because they have to answer to people who never see the children . . . and yet make significant decisions for them."

Teachers perceptions of the quality and usefulness of their interactions with their central office *contacts* or *supervisors* tended to be slightly more positive in some districts. On average, between 75 and 90% of teachers agree or somewhat agree that their special education supervisor understands their program and/or what they do in their job. In the district with the highest ratings of central office support, as high as 87% of teachers report that their supervisor "has my respect and trust." Three quarters agree that their supervisor "attends to my feelings and needs" and "supports my actions and ideas."

However, not all district supervisors received such high ratings. In one district, only 19% felt that the feedback from their special ed contact was helpful, and 46% not at all. It was also highly infrequent — a full 43% of teachers reported "never" receiving feedback from their central office contact.

When contacts *were* made, teachers often perceived these visits to be highly reactive in nature. Teachers indicated that administrators tended to focus on *monitoring their work* or unilaterally implementing quick-fix solutions to problems rather than on *proactively providing assistance* or coaching to help them successfully accomplish their work.

> I feel that they do not know what we do or care what we do — unless there's parents bitching. And then all of a sudden they just want to settle the conflict. They don't care what's going on, just settle it. I just don't feel like we're 'together for children.' So the teachers try hard. But you can't do it if you don't have support all the way up.

One teacher captured the feelings of several when she claimed that the central office were "like the police out there to make sure that I didn't qualify anybody who didn't meet the strict standards of the district." Another simply felt at a loss for what the role of the central office really was.

> I'm coming down hard on them, I guess, because I really never got handle on what they were supposed to do (referring to program specialists and central office staff). They certainly didn't help me.

Perceived Dissonance in Priorities and Values

Positive perceptions of central office support may depend on whether central office staff effectively communicate directions for special education that make sense to teachers and that incorporate teachers' core values and priorities — namely planning for and providing effective instruction to students with disabilities.

Many special educators reported at times that they felt at odds with the policies and directions advanced by their central offices. In one district, for example, over half of the teachers indicated in a survey that they had to follow policies and procedures that were in conflict with their best professional judgment. Forty-five percent thought that there was not widespread agreement in the district regarding objectives for special education students. In two other districts, almost half of the teachers disagreed with district goals and objectives for improving special education programs.

Teachers usually formed perceptions about administrative values and priorities, not based on direct discussion with administrators, *but rather on their interpretations of administrative decisions and/or actions taken over time.* For example, when administrators recognized special education faculty for meeting paperwork goals, while providing little recognition to teachers' for their successes with students, teachers often interpreted this to mean that administrators prioritize or value legal compliance over making meaningful strides with students. As one teacher recalled:

> We would get reinforced for completing our IEPs by certain dates, and didn't matter if I had gotten 13 kids out of the self-contained in the past three years. They never recognized that. A social worker might, but the administration as a whole, no.

In one district, teachers reported receiving a packet of "pencils and stickers" from the special education division as kudos for meeting paperwork goals. This type of response, when coupled with the absence of positive feedback regarding teachers' student-related achievements, not only felt condescending, but was perceived as a conflict in values by teachers and led to heightened feeling of frustration and stress.

> And they sent me my little packet of pencils. What a joke. To have new forms every year . . . and here I begged for computers for my kids.
>
> I didn't feel that people were backing up the students' needs. But that they were covering their legal behinds.

Additionally, teachers reported believing that administrative decisions were based largely on economic criteria with little regard for what is best for children. Again, teachers drew these conclusions from their interpretations of decisions made by administrators and not from any discussion between the two parties regarding the underlying values giving rise to these administrative decisions.

> They're looking at figures and money on paper. And they see that, "Oh, this program takes a teacher, an aide, and an interpreter. Wow! That's a lot of money! Let's cut that one out."
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> I see people putting kids in slots and not really even caring if it's the right slot. It's just like they come in and we're going to stick 'em over here, and nobody cares. I don't see any caring from the administration now as to what's happening with these kids. And I don't think anybody's saying, "Hey! We're in this for the kids!"

In one case, a teacher discussed her conflict in values as they became evident through a conversation with one of her administrators:

> I've even had the administration tell me to my face, "We are only required to do the minimum. We don't have to do a maximum. We just have to do what the law says." Period. That's it. Anything more, and there's no support for it. They draw the line right there. I mean, there's no vision for what a good special education department does. There's no good vision for what good teachers do.

The infrequent contact with central office staff in most districts and the lack of ongoing substantive discussion with administrators regarding what influences their decisions, led teachers to draw their own conclusions. Often teachers assumed an "us" versus "them" relationship, believing that their fundamental values for special education competed directly with those of the central office.

Directions for Addressing Problems in Central Office-Teacher Relations: Bridging the Understanding Gap

While there are no exact formulas for improving central office-teacher relations, we feel that there are at least two important areas to consider. Each are briefly stated below and covered in more detail in district strategic action planning reports.

- Expand opportunities for meaningful and relevant information exchange between central office staff and teachers. Central office-teacher relations would benefit from increased communication regarding central office and teacher values, priorities, district policy and rationale. Teachers' concerns express an urgent need for districts to expand opportunities for meaningful exchange of ideas and relevant information *particularly it relates to special education policy and the realities of teachers' day to day work.*

• Expand opportunities for professional development and learning. Many teachers spoke at length about their innovations in teaching and/or program design. Often these achievements, as perceived by the teacher, were based on long-term, self-initiated efforts. With frequency, teachers reported dissatisfaction with the amount of recognition they received for such work, often making statements to the effect that "nobody even noticed." In one district close to half of the teachers were dissatisfied with the opportunities for professional learning and growth available to them. Teachers often saw arrangement of these possibilities as the responsibility of the central office.

Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions: Section 2: Impact of Administrative Support on Job Satisfaction, Commitment, and Intent to Leave.

This summary report presents an integration of major findings on teachers' perceptions of working conditions based on survey and interview data from special educators in six large urban districts located throughout the country. In this section we focus on special educators' perceptions of administrative support at two levels: building and central office.

Administrative support is a multidimensional concept, involving a variety of attitudes and actions. In each of the districts, teacher satisfaction, commitment, and intent to leave were all highly associated with administrative support.

Interestingly, however, building support and central office support were not often highly correlated with each other. In one district, the correlation was low as .28, suggesting that teachers experience these two sources of support in distinct ways.

The following is a brief summary of major findings relating to teachers' perceptions of building and central office support.

Central Office Support

Many teachers perceive that central office administrators do not adequately understand and/or value what teachers do in their jobs on a daily basis. Negative perceptions are exacerbated by limited contact. Some teachers reported that, after several years of employment, they had not even met many key central office staff.

Lack of contact with higher level administration was problematic largely because teachers believed that judgments or decisions were being made about their work that were not adequately informed. In one district, only 30% felt the special education department understood their jobs well, and 32% *not at all*. This sense of being *managed from a distance* left many teachers feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and powerless to effect change. As one teacher put it:

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Building Administrator Support

For special education teachers, issues related to the principal are key to understanding perceived satisfaction and commitment to special education teaching.

In discussing the influence that building administrators can have, one teacher stated it simply: "The principal really does make a difference. I've worked with a lot of

different ones, and it matters. The personal philosophy of a site administrator can make such a difference in how a teacher will either blossom and create, or feel stifled and subjugated." Teachers' concerns related frequently to:

- a lack of understanding of what teachers do in their classrooms;
- failure to recognize the significance of teachers' work challenges and accomplishments and include them in the life of the school;
- inadequate levels of assistance with specific problems, such as discipline or integration efforts;
- reluctance to involve teachers in determining the shape of the school's special education programs.

In one district, 25% of the special education faculty are dissatisfied with the extent to which their principals understand what they do in their classroom. In an interview, one teacher reported that her principal did not understand her students' needs or capabilities and failed to recognize the significance of her work challenges and accomplishments.

> I had the hardest class there and the principal didn't appreciate what we did with them. I thought that was pretty sad for her not to acknowledge that these kids who bite and pinch and scratch and do weird things, are learning how to function. Learning how to be a little better... She's the one who told me, "You're not supposed to be teaching them how to read and write."

In another district, almost one third of the teachers surveyed did not feel that they could count on their principal to provide appropriate assistance when a student's behavior required it. One quarter indicated that their principal did not actively assist in teachers effort to integrate students.

One veteran teacher described her school as a "total leadership vacuum." She expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the level of responsibility taken by her principal to assist in managing student behavior problems, stating that "if we didn't do something on our own, it never got done."

Beyond providing technical assistance and feedback, some teachers talked about the degree to which principals communicated respect and created an environment in which teachers felt valued. Some talked about the extent to which their principals actively included them in the life of the school. One itinerant special educator recalled her experience:

> The principal was very reluctant to give me anything and seemed to be reluctant to treat me as a staff member. Her teachers were allotted certain materials and I was not. Usually it ended up that the secretary would say, "Here, have a stapler." or "Here's a pen." Practically the first thing out of her mouth was: "Well, whose budget are you on?"

> I guess she epitomized the whole thing when, on the very last day of school, she mispronounced my name. That kind of epitomized the whole year!

Nearly a third of the special education teaching staff in one district reported that they do not feel included in what goes on in their school.

Further, general educators were more likely than special educators to agree to the following statements: My principal a) provides current information about teaching/learning; b) informs me about school/district policies; c) explains reasons behind programs and practices; d) understands my program and what I do; e) provides leadership about what we are trying to achieve; and f) interacts with me frequently.

It is important to note, however, that many teachers also reported positive and supportive relationships with their building principals. For example, active participation in decision making, promoted by the principal, had a significant, positive effect on this teacher's work experience.

> [When developing a school improvement plan], most of the principals knock off a few lines on their own and send it in and say "this is what we're working on," and then they tell the whole faculty.

> Well, [our site administrator] has meetings with all of us, and asks *us* what we want to work on, what we think we'd like to see happening in the school. And once we outlined the objectives and so forth, she would give us the resources to do it. It just was such a feeling of being able to accomplish things! I had never felt that before. I'd never felt the power to really be able to make changes and accomplish things.

She further described how her principal went to considerable lengths to obtain needed resources for teachers — a form of *back-up* that contributed significantly to her satisfaction.

> Whatever little bits of money she could find in the budget, anywhere, she'd hunt it down for us. She'd get it there for us in some way or other. And if she couldn't, she'd say so, and then maybe we'd have to go into some other kind of strategy . But if it was there, she'd let us have it and she'd let us do what we felt we needed to do with it.

Some teachers discussed the power held by their principals to determine the shape of the school's special education programs. In one case, a principal's active leadership style contributed to the innovation and implementation of a successful co-teaching model, allowing special services to be delivered to students in their general education classrooms. The opportunity to discuss work, in an open and collaborative environment, contributed to a unprecedented growth period in this teacher's career.

> I had a period of growth at this school with my current principal that I just will treasure forever because of the way my principal administrates the school. She tells us what her philosophies are and what methods of teaching she thinks are best. She gives us copies of different research and things to let us know where she is. But she doesn't push to

change. She sends out little fish hooks, and if we bite, she reels us in and sends us all the places we need to go to grow in those particular areas.

She was concerned about the curriculum, she was concerned about educating the kids. She didn't care whether my chalk ledger was dirty or not or whether I had bulletin boards changed every couple of weeks.

When she came in to observe, rather than saying, "Well, I'd like to see you do this," or "I'd like to see you do that," she'd ask us *why* we would do the things that we would do! And then we'd actually have discussions about that! I'd find myself re-thinking what I had done and why I had done it and if it was the right thing to do.

Given that, in the not too distant past, building administrators often had little or no direct responsibility for special education teachers, students, or programs, the good news is that between 40% and 60% of teachers remaining in the field report positive and supportive relationships with their building principals. The need for continued effort in this area, however, is supported by the fact that sizable numbers of teachers in all districts, still report concerns.

An appreciable proportion of special education teachers still feel isolated, and attempts to collaborate with other teachers in the school are likely to be extremely difficult. These findings also indicate that school buildings vary greatly in the extent to which they support inclusive special education.

Directions for Addressing Problems with Administrative Support: Bridging the Understanding Gap

While there are no exact formulas for improving administrator-teacher relations, we feel that there are at least two important areas to consider. Each are briefly stated below and covered in more detail in district strategic action planning reports.

- Expand opportunities for meaningful and relevant information exchange between administrators and teachers. Administrator-teacher relations would benefit from increased communication regarding values, priorities, district policy and rationale. Teachers' concerns express an urgent need for districts to expand opportunities for meaningful exchange of ideas and relevant information *particularly it relates to special education policy and the realities of teachers' day to day work.*

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