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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role of rural special education administrators when placing disabled students in regular classrooms. When dealing with inclusion, problems are intensified in rural areas because administrators, teachers, parents, and students come into contact with each other at the grocery store, church, and community events. Because school administrators typically have multiple roles in the community, they are highly visible and under constant public scrutiny. Four real-life examples illustrate the multiple roles of a special education administrator in a small rural school district. The special education director found herself placed in difficult positions, personally as well as professionally. Strategies that the administrator used to promote successful inclusion involved allowing general education teachers to volunteer in the development of inclusive classrooms; linking regular and special education teachers before placement in order to locate adequate resources and explore possible problems; ensuring that regular and special education teachers had time to meet; making resources available and identifying training needs; and having a plan in place to assist team members in solving problems. Additionally, the literature provides general suggestions for administrators that rural special education directors can apply, including focusing on the end product, paying attention to tasks such as returning phone calls and following up on requests, knowing strengths and weaknesses, being visible and observant, communicating effectively, attending to relationships, learning to deal with criticism, and keeping conflict to a minimum. (LP)

INCLUSION:
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BUT A COMMUNITY ISSUE

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Placement of special needs students in regular education classrooms under inclusion creates difficult choices for administrators. Must the needs of the handicapped child be matched with the teaching style of the teacher with whom the student is to be placed or is the child placed with the teacher who volunteers to accept the child? What happens when a placement "goes sour" or if those involved are cousins or close friends? What if a parent becomes unhappy and voices their complaint in local business places or at church choir practice? In a small rural district, where these issues become public knowledge, inclusion becomes a community as well as school issue, placing the special education administrator in a difficult position.

When dealing with placing students in regular classrooms and maintaining that placement in rural districts, problems are enhanced because administrators, teachers, parents and students rub shoulders together at the grocery store, at church, and in the neighborhood. In some instances problems are extended to within and between families. Mallory (1995) states it well.

> "Special education personnel also play the role of PTA officer, 4-H leader, church elder, and local farrier. While urban adults also play multiple roles comparable to these, in rural communities individuals play these roles in shared public settings. There is public knowledge of the multiple roles played by one person, and the same individuals interact with each other in multiple settings carrying out the diverse roles necessary for each of those settings. Maintaining a professional identity in this example, or maintaining privacy for families who have a child with a disability, become difficult tasks" (p. 5).

For the person making the decisions it becomes a "fishbowl" situation, with an invisible, but very real, job description added to their regular duties. Yet this "fishbowl" effect is not unique to administrators of special education services. Others, like school superintendents, experience the same impact on a day-to-day basis. In rural areas, for example, the superintendent is one of the most visible persons in town. There the superintendents' unofficial job description often includes being custodian, chauffeur, coach, church deacon, source of information for local media and bearer of bad news

in general - all while being judged on their merits as the chief educational leader for the district. Every superintendent understands that his/her time is public time and that while on personal business - going to church, to the service station or to the doctor - parents will want to discuss their child's problems.

Over the years, literature has accumulated to guide superintendents through the difficulties of living in the public eye. Much of this literature has been generated by superintendents themselves to help other leaders. But there is a scarcity of literature to guide the special education director or school administrator through similar stress, particularly when they engage in reform that takes on the magnitude of inclusion. Nevertheless, advice written for superintendents for living and working effectively in the public eye is certainly applicable for those who administrate special education, particularly those in rural areas. The purpose of this paper is 1) to present some real-life examples that illustrate the multiple roles of one particular special education director in a rural school district, 2) to pinpoint some guidelines this director used to successfully implement inclusion, and 3) to provide some advice for meeting that invisible job description.

Tony

Maintaining a professional stance can be difficult for a rural special education director. Tony was a second grader with a pervasive developmental disorder whose parents became interested in inclusion when Tony was a kindergartner. The well educated parents were keenly aware of their and Tony's rights. They were experiencing considerable anxiety over the placement. Consequently, they wanted to be deeply involved in Tony's education, to the point of dictating who would be in Tony's speech group, what time the speech teacher could come to get him, and how the teacher could discipline him. They second-guessed every decision. There were frequent meetings at which tensions ran high, requiring the constant presence of the special education director. As battle lines were drawn, objectivity and rapport were desperately needed. For the director, being objective required maintaining a professional distance, but that was difficult as she had children in Tony's school, was the PTA president, and a room mother, making chance encounters with this family fairly frequent but awkward. "It is difficult to chair an IEP meeting during which the mother breaks down and sobs and then meet that same mom at a PTA meeting later on that day and act as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred,"

reported the director. One can only suppose the discomfort of the parents. The issue was further compounded by the fact that the special education director's sons and Tony's brother were on the same basketball team so the director encountered Tony and his parents several times a week at practices and games. Said the director, "I approach this family as a professional - hopefully a friendly and open professional, but keeping some distance personally. This feels a bit strange on a Saturday when I'm wearing grubby jeans and a sweatshirt, with mud covering my sneakers and rain dripping from my hair. Yet living in a small town necessitates that I am on "duty" at all times. Careful handling will be needed here and this may occur during an IEP meeting, a PTA meeting, or during a basketball game."

Joshua

Focusing on the welfare of the disabled child can require extraordinary effort in some situations. Joshua was a first grade child with academic deficits and behavior problems that caused him to be disruptive, even given to significant temper outbursts. Because of inclusion, Joshua was placed in a regular classroom most of the day. With a change in medication, Joshua's outbursts increased to the point where he drew blood when he scratched the teacher. Inclusion, at this point, was not running smoothly. During this time it so happened the director made an appointment to see the teacher, not to discuss Joshua, but the director's son, Nathan, who was also in Joshua's class. Coming in with her "mom" hat on, she was surprised and dismayed to find the discussion centering solely around the teacher's frustration with Joshua. "I was resentful that I was being asked to put my son's needs in second place so that this teacher could express her concerns about how damaging Joshua's presence was to the class." Putting the director on the spot, the teacher asked, "How do you feel, as a mom, having Joshua in Nathan's class?" Then further speculated, "I suppose, because you are the director, you had to do this." Fortunately, the director was able to say that her son came home daily happily reporting on Joshua's accomplishments that resulted from his efforts to help. "This is the kind of citizen I want my child to be and I am happy this opportunity is available to him," was the director's response, which refocused the discussion on the best welfare of not only the child with the disability but the director's child as well.

Shelly

What happens at school has implications for administrator's families in rural districts. Shelly, a little girl with a developmental disorder and prone to aggressive behavior with other children, managed well in an early childhood setting under a strict behavior management plan. But, when placed in a regular kindergarten class, hit and shoved the other children. Despite advance training, the teacher was unable to cope and demanded the child be returned to her former class. At the request of the principal, the special education director visited to offer reassurance. Said the director, "When I walked into her classroom I realized that this teacher was the coach of the soccer team my son had played against the previous weekend. We had chatted about the game afterwards without realizing who the other was. I felt both startled and defensive. Would this teacher take advantage of our brief positive encounter on the soccer field? If things didn't go her way in this situation, would my son suffer the consequences? I felt vulnerable." After the director discussed the problem with the teacher, provided reassurance, and marshaled support from a variety of sources, the teacher was able to succeed with Shelly. The director checked on the classroom regularly, finding that the teacher was cordial, a fortunate ending as the teacher and the director now have sons on the same basketball team.

Sean

In rural districts, personal friendships can be placed in jeopardy when inclusion does not go smoothly. Sean was a special needs child, the son of an occupational therapist, whose work in the district brought her in close contact with the special education director. The two became friends. Knowing the transition to kindergarten from early childhood would be difficult for Sean, the special education director made efforts to minimize the problems. Yet, Sean had difficulty separating from his mother and, when she dropped him off in front of the school as the other parents did, Sean threw major temper tantrums. Initially the mother parked the car and walked Sean to his classroom, but the tantrums simply took place in a different location, the classroom door. The IEP committee decided that the special education teacher would meet Sean in front of the building to escort him to class. Problems began immediately, however, as Sean did not want to leave his mother's van. He clung to the seat, screamed and kicked, and held up the line of traffic behind them. Concerned for traffic and for other students witnessing the outbursts, the principal requested the mother drop Sean off at a side door. Objecting, the adamant mother said, "I know my rights. You

have to do this my way. Drop Sean off at the front door!" News about the problem spread through the school community. The director was torn, knowing the side door solution was a good one, but also fully aware that occupational therapists are hard to find in rural areas. Besides, this OT was a personal friend and, to make matters worse, criticism would run high if this was mishandled. Gently, firmly, and persistently, the director worked to persuade the OT to give the side door a try. The efforts were successful and the child had no problems with the new arrangement. Yet, the director says, "The encounter did change our relationship. Although still friendly, things are not the same between us. Did she expect I would go along with her wishes based on our friendship, or based on my desire to keep a very good OT, or because of community pressure? I will never know."

Successful Inclusion in Rural Districts

The special education director described here was frequently placed in positions that were difficult, personally as well as professionally. She came to know from research and her own experience that some guidelines exist for implementing a change as drastic as inclusion. The following highlights what she learned.

1. Once the decision was made to explore an inclusive program for a child, a host of discussions and decisions needed to occur. One of the key decisions for this rural administrator was placement. Certainly the needs of the child were of high consideration, but the ability of the teacher to meet the child's needs were paramount. The literature bears this out. Vaughn and Schumm (1995) recommend that general education teachers be allowed to self-select their involvement in the development of an inclusive classroom. Teachers are generally more open to implementing decisions that they have participated in making. Also, allowing teachers to volunteer their involvement provides some assurance that the teacher is willing to learn the necessary skills if they are not known already. The special education director in this case knew that when teacher consent is by-passed, there is the risk of dealing with a teacher who feels imposed upon and resentful, feelings which spill over into the community as the problems is discussed at home, church and grocery store. In the cases discussed here, the teachers' desire to attempt inclusion was one of the first considerations and were directly related to the students' success.
2. Once the placement of a child was identified, the director found that support for the regular education teacher was needed

immediately. As in the example of Tony, the special education director attended all meetings to prevent problems from mushrooming. Experience suggests that the integration process works most effectively not only when the administrator is involved but also when the special education teacher and the general education teacher work side-by-side (Barry, 1994). Working together begins even before the child is placed in the regular classroom and includes open discussions, finding adequate resources and exploration of possible problems.

3. The administrator involved plays a key role in the success of the placement by making sure the teachers have the time to meet, making resources available, by identifying training needs, and by staying closely involved (Snell and Raynes, 1995). In Joshua's situation, the director's ability to stay deeply involved, personally (through her own son) and professionally, allowed her to respond effectively to a teacher's anger. York et al (1992) identify four types of support for inclusive classrooms: resource, moral, technical and evaluation support. In rural settings resources are often scarce so making fair decisions is imperative, but moral support can easily be supplied by validating and affirming the feelings of troubled staff members.

4. As was the case with Shelly, the special education director found that few, if any, inclusive classrooms are successful from the outset as problems arise periodically. Having a plan in place to assist team members in solving problems is generally found to facilitate quicker resolution. Graden and Bauer (1992) outline a sequence of problem-solving steps that can be used as a systematic tool to guide the process. 1. Define and clarify the problem. 2. Analyze the problem. 3. Explore alternatives. 4. Select a strategy. 5. Clarify the strategy. 6. Implement the strategy and provide support. 7. Evaluate outcomes (p. 91).

Surviving the Limelight

These experiences of the rural special education director, supported by research, provide guidance for the routine and more visible aspects of implementing inclusion. But where can rural special education administrators turn for help on the invisible job description - living in the public eye? We turn here to advice given by and for those who are experts at living in the limelight - school superintendents. A number of suggestions recur in the literature.

These suggestions well apply to rural special education administrators as well as anyone working in a job where they are under public scrutiny.

1. Focus on the End Product. Individuals having an "ax to grind" or who are single minded are interested in drawing the administrator's attention away from the real issue - the student. Instead, the administrator's honor, integrity and efficiency are attacked publicly. The best interests of the child must always be the goal and any attempts to sidetrack that goal must be redirected. Under inclusion, when the student focus is maintained, administrator, teacher and parents can become collaborators rather than adversaries. For example, in the case of Joshua, where the teacher resorted to personal pressure, the special education director was not swayed from her vision of a child needing the benefits of a regular classroom.

2. Do Little Things Well. In advising superintendents in how to become outstanding administrators, Mahoney (1990) says that everything counts, especially the little things. If you're meeting with a teacher, for example, be on time; if you say you'll check on something, do it immediately. It is difficult for a parent to openly conflict with a special education director who takes the time to make phone calls, patiently listens to them at church, or drops by the house to discuss even the most trivial of matters. When teachers express a concern about a student and the administrator drops everything to take prompt action, trust is developed between the administrator and staff (Snell & Raynes, 1995). In Tony's case, the special education director attended every meeting that pertained to his welfare, which could not go unnoticed by Tony's parents or the staff.

3. Know Your Strengths; Be Aware of Your Limitations. Know what you do well, develop your own style and learn to work well within that style. It is not true that only one style will work. Some administrators are analytical and deal well with information, others are more intuitive and emotional. One is expressive, outgoing, and enthusiastic, another is reflective, calm, non judgmental, and introverted (Mahoney, 1990). When you know that there are some areas where you are weak and make sure someone in the organization is strong in that area. Yet, no matter how hard you are willing to work, there are limitations to managing inclusion. There are issues you cannot control, people who will refuse to cooperate. Identify the major issues and work with those. In Sean's situation,

the director used her strength of being firm but fair to resolve a difficult situation. This action helped win her a reputation as a fair-minded person who could not easily be pushed around.

4. Be visible and be observant. This advice is offered repeatedly to superintendents who wish to keep their jobs. In rural districts where one may feel too visible, it means making the right choices. Any administrator can "hide" behind paperwork, especially if difficult and unpleasant things are happening. The person who is responsible for placing and maintaining students with disabilities in regular classrooms must not only be available during crisis situations but establish and maintain regular contact with all involved. Sometimes being present at the outset of an incident can prevent a full-blown crisis, which, in a distorted version, is the day's news at the beauty shop. An observant administrator knows what is going on in the schools and in the community.

5. Communicate. Every published piece of advice for superintendents that was reviewed included communication as a key to success when working in the public eye. Snell and Raynes (1995) found several keys to effective communication when in came to the special education administrators who deal with inclusion. These were 1) communicating directly with primary teachers rather than through paraprofessionals, 2) conveying information about the student to involved staff, and 3) simply listening to teachers (while reserving judgment). Chalmers (1993) found increased success with inclusion when frequent, but brief, communication between the classroom teacher and special education teacher was arranged. In advice to superintendents, Griffith (1990) suggests ensuring that everyone is informed so that, when decisions are ready to be made, all parties are ready to make them. Griffith claims that most bad decisions or failures to make a decision at all, come about because the parties to the decision were not ready to do the business. For the special education director described here, every situation was a forum for communication, ball games, PTA meetings and school. The communication was not always overt, but her professionalism well conveyed her beliefs.

6. Attend to Relationships. This goes beyond communication. According to Larner and Halpern (1987) rural special education services must be relationship based. Not only is the goal of such programs to enhance the education of the child with a disability, there must also be a concern for within family relationships as well

as relationships between staff and the family. Reporting on a study of rural schools across the country, Larner and Halpern found that staff working in rural settings tended to focus on interpersonal relationships, using themselves as a source of support and intervention rather than referring to external, formal services, reflecting the person-oriented approach. Adams and Veselka (1993) admonish superintendents to 1) eliminate any possible appearance or perception of conflict of interest, and 2) eliminate favoritism, both professionally and socially; treat everyone with equal respect and dignity. As in the cases described here, the director's personal feelings often had to be set aside in favor of an objective stance.

7. Learn to be Thick Skinned Because You'll Often Have to Stand Alone. For the special education director, as an administrator who was engaging in reform that critically impacted teachers, students, and parents, it was not possible to avoid criticism. Mahoney's (1990) advice to superintendents well applies to her and all administrators. 1) Do what needs to be done, and 2) know that you will often have to stand alone. Finding people to confide in and who will give honest feedback is also important but a painful drawback for rural administrators, so cultivating confidants in other districts may be one solution.

8. Keep Open Conflict to a Minimum. If an administrator and a teacher or parent are at odds, the chances of keeping the disagreement private are remote in a rural setting. All conflict becomes open conflict. As Detwiler (1993-1994) suggests for superintendents, "Educators need to understand that public trust is not as deep as it used to be. When challenges do arise, welcome the opposition into open and structured discussion. In fact, insist on it. Structure the discussion so arguments can be responded to with counter arguments and evidence with counter evidence. Push each other to the point at which the basic assumptions of the positions become revealed. ...Such a strategy provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate the value of critical thinking" (p. 28). In the earlier examples, the special education director risked taking an offensive approach, meeting the teachers and parents with open discussion. The result was a heightened understanding of inclusion and a far more successful year for the students.

No matter how much hard work goes into making inclusion successful, the administrator orchestrating the process will probably receive little recognition for the efforts. And, no matter how great

the search for the right vehicles for success it may be as simple as Moery and Chance (1993) suggest to superintendents - that the best tools may be a sense of humor and a large bucket of common sense. Then again, you can not go wrong with Twain's advice: Always do the right thing; it will gratify some people and astonish the rest.

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