

Principals' Perceptions of the *Gaskin* Settlement

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Paper Presented at Pennsylvania Educational Research Association (PERA)

October 26, 2007

Grantville, PA

Abstract

The *Gaskin* settlement resulted from a class action lawsuit brought on the behalf of students with significant disabilities in Pennsylvania. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the *Gaskin* settlement, schools in Pennsylvania are mandated to increase the placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The purpose of this research was to investigate principal's attitudes as they relate to the Gaskin Settlement in Pennsylvania. This important case demonstrates what may happen in other states if the supports and services are not available to fully include children with disabilities, as per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004. There is little written about this topic and yet the ramifications for schools are great. Since the *Gaskin* settlement has an impact on the roles and responsibilities of school principals, a study was conducted to assess their attitudes toward the *Gaskin* Settlement. Survey responses from 446 principals were compiled as part of this project. The findings from chi square tests of goodness of fit indicate that elementary principals report a more positive opinion of the *Gaskin* settlement than do secondary principals or principals of “other” secondary institutions (such as charter schools, vocational technical schools, magnet schools, etc.). Scheduling of courses and staff discomfort are conjectured as possible reasons for this relationship. In addition to affecting the public schools in Pennsylvania, the implications go far beyond and will impact colleges and universities in their teacher preparation programs.

Introduction

The issue of access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities has been a concern for over 15 years. In trying to meet the intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, educators and administrators have struggled with how to effectively include these students into the general education setting. This issue was brought to the forefront in 1994 with the filing of the *Gaskin* case, which was settled in 2005. “The *Gaskin* Settlement Agreement is a formal resolution between the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and a group of families and advocacy organizations who had filed a class-action lawsuit against PDE on behalf of a group of children with disabilities in 1994.” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2007, p.1)

The *Gaskin* settlement stipulates that

- the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team will first consider placement in the regular education classroom with supplementary aids and services;
- students with disabilities will have increased opportunities to receive the supports and services in the general education classroom;
- Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) agreed to make changes in its systems for exercising general supervision over special education (Bauman, Silla, & Stufft, in press).

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to investigate principal's attitudes as they relate to the Gaskin Settlement. There is little written about this topic and yet the ramifications for schools are great. Principals were selected because they are the

individuals charged with bringing about change at the building level. Principals will need to change their thought process and will now have to think about school enrollment in singular terms. Inclusive curriculum will now become the expected practice for all students. Special education labels will not be used in placement decisions (Bailey & Du Plessis, 1997).

Literature Review

With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the *Gaskin* settlement, schools in Pennsylvania are mandated to increase the placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The direction that has been set is not just to include students in regular education but to move the entire building to become an inclusionary community. Inclusionary schools do not suddenly appear due to plain happenstance. In order for inclusion to occur, strong directed leadership is needed to lead those involved to reach this end. (Parker & Day, 1997) The direction and vision provided by the building principal is fundamental to achieving special education programs within the general education environment (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006; Parker & Day, 1997). Administrative leadership is a strong indicator of teacher beliefs and attitudes in buildings that implement inclusionary practices. The leadership ability of the principal influences and directly affects every aspect of the working conditions of teachers in the building and particularly those teachers that are directly working with children with special needs. (DiPaola, Tschanned-Moran & Walther-Thomas, 2004, p. 2).

Principals as instructional leaders are also responsible for providing staff development and training, access to support personnel, a positive building climate

and the development of a master schedule (Idol, 2006; Salisbury, 2006; Martinez & Humphreys, 2006). It is through this scheduling process that inclusion can be facilitated by making classes available for all students to participate (Parker & Day, 1997). Many principals are making scheduling changes that have placed more students in regular education for greater amounts of time (Parker & Day, 1997). Student participation in classes is the first step in inclusion. But this action alone will not be enough to meet the mandate presented through IDEA and it will take a strong, concentrated effort by the principal and the teachers in order to meet NCLB standards. (DiPaola, Tschanned-Moran & Walther-Thomas, 2004, p. 1).

Design

This study was designed to assess the attitudes of the building principals toward the *Gaskin* settlement. In the spring of 2007, the principals in the 501 Pennsylvania school districts were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the impact of the *Gaskin* settlement. An introductory letter was e-mailed through PENNLINK, the Pennsylvania electronic mail system, which connects the Pennsylvania Department of Education with all of the public schools and Intermediate Units in the Commonwealth.

The researchers received 446 responses to the survey. Principals were asked a variety of questions on a twelve-item anonymous questionnaire using a Likert scale and forced choice format, submitted on surveymonkey.com that related to the specific areas of interest of the study. The questions on the survey were grouped into the following categories: (1) demographic information, (2) opinion of the *Gaskin* settlement, (3) how successful they are in including students across disability categories, and (4) staff

attitudes. Respondents also indicated their most important training needs for including students with disabilities using an open-ended response.

Frequency distributions were run on the following: (1) school classification (urban, suburban, rural), (2) building type for primary assignment, (3) number of special education courses in training, (4) number of students with IEPs in buildings, and (5) opinion of the *Gaskin* settlement. Chi squares were performed on the following variables: (1) opinions regarding the Gaskin settlement by school classification category, (2) opinions regarding the Gaskin settlement by number of special education courses taken, (3) opinions regarding the Gaskin settlement by number of IEPs in the building, and (4) opinions regarding the Gaskin settlement by school building type.

Results

Respondents were asked to self-categorize into a school district classification of suburban, rural, urban, or other. The respondents indicated that approximately 39% of the school districts categorized themselves as suburban, 39% as rural, and 22% as urban. The respondents indicated that 48% of the respondents were assigned to elementary buildings, 23% to high school buildings, 18% to middle school buildings, and 11% other. Vocational technical schools, specialized secondary schools such as academies, and magnet schools were categorized in the “other” category of building type. The highest category (approximately 35%) for respondents was between 31 and 60 students with IEPs in their buildings. The remaining respondents fell within the range of 0 to 30 or 61 to 120 plus. The lowest category of respondents (approximately 10%) reported that they had between 91 and 120 students with IEPs in their buildings.

Respondents were next asked their opinion of the *Gaskin Settlement*. Most respondents tended to be undecided (34 %), agree with (30%), or disagree with (21%) the *Gaskin Settlement*. Very few respondents held strong opinions about the *Gaskin Settlement*. Only 7% strongly disagreed and 6% strongly agreed.

Table 1 reports opinions regarding the *Gaskin* settlement across school classification category. Although most respondents tended to fall into the middle categories (agree, undecided, or disagree) regarding their opinion of the *Gaskin* settlement, there is a significant relationship between opinion of the Gaskin settlement and school classification, $\chi^2(8, N=426) = 21.719$, $p=.005$. The major difference appears to be in the strongly agree opinion as only 2% and 1% of the rural and suburban principals agree with the decision, whereas 11% of the urban principals agree.

Table 1

Opinions Regarding the *Gaskin* Settlement by School Classification Category

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Rural	2%	33%	36%	23%	6%
Suburban	1%	31%	35%	24%	9%
Urban	11%	33%	35%	17%	4%

A chi square indicated that there was a pattern between principal’s opinions of the *Gaskin Settlement* and number of special education courses taken, $\chi^2(16, N=427) = 804.438$, $p<.001$. Table 2 reports that those who had few special education courses (zero or one) were more likely to agree or strongly agree with the *Gaskin* settlement.

Principals who had a greater number of courses in special education (four or more) were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the Gaskin settlement.

Table 2

Opinions Regarding the *Gaskin* Settlement by Number of Special Education Courses Taken

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Zero	22%	78 %	0%	0%	0%
One	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Two	0%	37%	63%	0%	0%
Three	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Four or More	0%	0%	0%	76%	24%

Table 3 displays the results of a Pearson chi square, indicating a .000 level of significance for a relationship between opinions of the *Gaskin* settlement by school building type, $\chi^2(12, N=427) = 946.952, p < .001$. It appears that elementary building principals agreed with the *Gaskin* settlement, whereas high school principals disagreed with the settlement.

Table 3

Opinions Regarding the *Gaskin* Settlement by School Building Type

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Elementary	7%	63%	30%	0%	0%
Middle School	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
High School	0%	0%	6%	92%	2%

Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
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Results from a chi square indicate that there is no significant relationship between opinion of the Gaskin settlement and number of IEPs in the building, $\chi^2(16, N=422) = 23.698, p=.096$.

Discussion

Significant relationships were found ($p < .001$) between the following: (1) opinions regarding the *Gaskin* settlement and school building type of primary assignment and (2) opinions of the Gaskin settlement and school classification category (urban, suburban, rural).

The findings indicate that elementary principals report a more positive opinion of the *Gaskin* settlement than do secondary principals or principals of “other” secondary institutions (such as charter schools, vocational technical schools, magnet schools, etc.). A study conducted by Idol, 2006, found that despite positive elementary support, that very few secondary educators thought that students with special education needs should be taught in the general education classes without special assistance. A follow-up study to determine if secondary principals share this same attitude would be something of interest. One can speculate that this may be due to the fact that elementary educators are generalists and therefore more able to adapt and include students with disabilities in the general education curriculum whereas secondary educators are subject specialists and focus more on training in their content area. It may be because elementary educators teach multiple subjects that they are able to cross curriculum areas much more easily. This helps to facilitate inclusion.

Scheduling at the secondary level is more difficult than at the elementary level. This may be due to the fact that at the elementary level, curriculum drives scheduling whereas at the secondary level, curriculum requests drive scheduling. In addition, secondary principals are exploring options moving away from the traditional seven or eight period day schedules and experimenting with different allocations of time in order to provide students with disabilities more time in general education. (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2006; Parker & Day, 1997). Scheduling issues may be a possible contributing factor that might influence a secondary principal to report a less positive opinion of the *Gaskin* settlement. Taken from the standpoint of the IDEA 2004, students are to be included where they can be successful. At the secondary level, since student requests drive the scheduling, secondary principals may find it more difficult to have classes where special education students can be included successfully, since there are many more options and ultimately the student is selecting his or her schedule and unaware of the course requirements when doing so.

The NCLB legislation has made it clear that principals are responsible for improving the academic achievement of the students in their building. The legislation clearly recognizes that principals and teachers will need to share this task as they represent the people “closest to the customers” (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007 p 219). Principals must understand that special education is not a place, nor a program. Success of children in school is dependent upon the principal using good problem solving skills. There is no one size fits all formula when looking at the different needs of the students and providing opportunities for them to succeed. (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004 p. 63). “At the level of the school, special education is a set of services and supports that is

provided to individual students to give them access to curriculum and to ensure that they continually learn and progress in that curriculum” (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004, p. 3).

Principals’ negative opinions of the *Gaskin* settlement may be linked to staff discomfort. If the staff is voicing negative attitudes regarding inclusion, it is the principal who is the one that receives them. This may be more likely to happen at the secondary level because the requirements for special education teachers to meet the highly qualified status are challenging (Neill, 2006). It is more difficult for secondary education teachers to find room in their post-secondary training program for special education courses due to the demands of their content area. In addition to the content teachers at the secondary level not having the training in special education, the special education consultant at the secondary level may not feel comfortable consulting in the content area due to a lack of training. However, this is not the same at the elementary level, since these educators may receive more generalized training in elementary content and pedagogy which support inclusionary strategies. In addition to affecting the public schools in Pennsylvania, the implications go far beyond and will impact colleges and universities in their teacher preparation programs.

Summary

As special education law changes and federal law amends the challenges being faced by school personnel will continue to likewise change. School district personnel are going to be required to modify their current practices to meet the ever-changing requirements of federal law and court decisions. The primary responsibility for this ongoing evaluation of special education programs falls with the school leaders.

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