Max's Family Experience: Web-Resources for Working with Special Education Students and their Families

Raschelle Theoharis, Gallaudet University & Michael Fitzpatrick, Mexico State University

Introduction

Developing a positive school culture has become an extremely daunting task for today's principals to achieve (Habegger, 2008) because they typically undertake unprecedented responsibilities (Hess & Kelly, 2007) compared to principals of the past (Sewall, 1996). This is clearly evident as today's principals are required to put in longer hours, lead larger schools, and supervise more faculty and staff members (Ferrandino, 2001). Additionally they need to create a positive learning environment for students (Halawah, 2005), a productive work environment for their employees (Kaplan & Owings, 2002), and contend with a variety of student behaviors at the building level (Hartzell & Petrie, 1992).

Aside from the duties briefly noted above, one of the major challenges principals encounter is guaranteeing that special education (SPED) programs are an active and welcomed part of the school community (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). Moreover the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2002) has increased principals' responsibilities to ensure the academic success for *all* students (Abedi, 2004; Berry, 2004; Linn, 2003; Rose, 2004) especially students with disabilities (Jones, Zirkel, & Barrack, 2008). Similarly the reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004) reinforced the requirements of NCLB (Zirkel, 2007). To ensure IDEIA mandates are implemented with the spirit in which they are intended, principals need to be informed and committed to increasing the academic and social outcomes for *all* students with disabilities (Rafoth & Foriska, 2006).

To illustrate the importance of the principal's ability to successfully create and foster a school climate (Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2009; Halawah, 2005) this article will present a case study that focuses on one family's interaction with two different elementary school principals with very diverse perspectives of SPED and students with disabilities, specifically a child with autism. Each case scenario illustrates issues related to a principal's ability or inability to:

- Establish an effective and positive school climate that promotes access to the general education curriculum (Jones et al., 2008; Thurlow, 2005).
- Communicate a clear understanding of the responsibilities to students with disabilities according to NCLB (2002) and IDEIA (2004) mandates.
- Play an active role in Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings and promote success and access for *all* students.
- Support the needs of families of children with disabilities.

In addition, this article will provide web-based resources from the field of SPED--specifically autism--that support the need for principals to use effective leadership and communication skills to meet the needs of SPED programs, educators, students, and parents.

Principals and SPED

NCLB (2002) ushered in a new era of standards and accountability. Although NCLB has been reauthorized, the implications of the act are rooted in holding schools and school districts accountable for their students' educational outcomes (Abedi, 2004) and compels them to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) on behalf of *all* of their students (Abedi, 2004; Berry, 2004; Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2007; Linn, 2003; Rose, 2004). From this perspective, it is clear that principals are responsible for ensuring their educators are using scientifically based practices to make meaningful improvements in their students educational outcomes (Calhoon & Fuchs, 2003; Fleischner & Manheimer, 1997; Shavelson, Phillips, Towne, & Feuer, 2003; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006), including students with autism (Drasgow, Lowrey, & Yell, 2005).

Leadership is a major component of meeting AYP at the building level (Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2007; Gardiner, Canfield-Davis, & Anderson, 2009). Thus, principals who possess strong leadership and communication skills positively impact the classroom and school setting. Additionally effective communication and planning helps ensure all members of the school are informed of the mission, goals, priorities, and progress of the learning community (Ruder, 2008). Planning facilitates understanding and a sense of comfort throughout the building and among faculty and staff (LaFasto & Larson, 2001).

Conversely according to Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harness (2001) principals who lack these skills sets negatively impact both general and special educator's ability to effectively educate their students. Similarly, principal's who poorly articulate the school's mission and goal statements often encounter confusion among faculty and staff members because they typically lack organization, fail to disseminate information, and do not communicate a clear vision (Fisher & Frey, 2003).

Unfortunately these issues are exacerbated because administrative training is often minimal (Reynolds, 2008) and Bateman and Bateman (2006) reported that it is ultimately the principals' responsibility to ensure that the entire staff—not just special educators—are knowledgeable about students with disabilities. This is particularly important because the more well-informed general educators are about disabilities, the more confident they are when they work with or encounter students with disabilities within the classroom or school setting (Hall, 2007; Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007).

Sadly, based on a systematic review of the literature, there was no clear definition of administrative support (Yoon & Gilchrist, 2003) or guidelines for principals to follow when working with or supporting educators who work with students with disabilities, specifically students with autism. Based on the dearth of information related to effective principal support in the literature, the following sections provide readers with a case study perspective and an overview of two differing administrative styles when working with a student with autism, his family, and faculty and staff. These sections focus on the importance of effective communication to help ensure provisions in NCLB (2002) and IDEIA (2004) are met.

Meet Max

Last fall my Max started kindergarten. This milestone brought about the realization that an important phase in our family life was about to begin. Like all parents of children entering new developmental phases, this one was accompanied with a myriad of feelings on the part of family members including apprehension, excitement, nervousness, anticipation, and fear of the unknown. Beginning the previous spring, we engaged in many preparatory events such as the kindergarten *round-up*, immunizations, and shopping for school supplies.

As a mother, I knew these preparations would facilitate his success, not only for the first day of kindergarten, but throughout the academic school year. As a former educator and current teacher educator and researcher, I knew early school success would also help set the stage for Max's long-term academic achievement. Unlike families of other children entering kindergarten, families who have children with disabilities face more challenges during new developmental phases. Our family faced these additional challenges as we transitioned Max from a SPED early childhood program into kindergarten.

Max was diagnosed with autism at the age of two and joined the increasing number of students with autism entering the school setting (Marshall & Fox, 2006; Nelson & Snow-Huefner, 2003). Historically, students with autism have been characterized by low academic achievement (Kirk, Gallagher, Anastasiow, & Coleman, 2006), social isolation (Tantam, 2000; Wiseman & Koffsky, 2006), poor curriculum instruction (Turnbull & Cilley, 1999), and served in SPED classrooms segregated from their non disabled peers (Bredberg & Davidson, 1999; Pamelazita & Buschbacher; 2003). As a parent, these marginalized outcomes were very alarming.

My husband and I quickly learned that autism was a complex disorder (Marshall & Fox, 2006) and approximately 194,000 students with autism between 6-through-21 received SPED services under IDEIA (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Additionally we discovered that prevailing estimates suggest that one out of every 166 newborns will have autism. Despite our hopes, we observed Max displaying many *typical* characteristics which negatively impacted his ability to communicate verbally and nonverbally (Schepis, Reid, Behrmann, & Sutton, 1998), transition from one task to another (Marks, Shaw-Hegwer, Schrader, Longaker, Peters, Powers, 2003), and socialize appropriately (Filipek, Accardo, Ashwal, Baranek, Cook, & Dawson, 2000; Lord & McGee 2001).

To address these concerns, he received early intervention services in the areas of occupational therapy, speech and language, and SPED. At the end of receiving early education services, Max's teachers reported he had made great progress and was ready for kindergarten with appropriate accommodations, modifications, paraprofessional support, and related educational services. By May, he managed his personal needs (e.g., dressing and washing his hands), followed simple one-step directions, and demonstrated many appropriate pre-academic skills (e.g., letter and number recognition, one-to-one correspondence, and sound-symbol relationships). While he had many pre-kindergarten skills, we knew he would still need occupational therapy for his fine motor skills, handwriting, and sensory needs.

In addition to his strengths, we were very aware of Max's weaknesses including processing verbal information, difficulties with unfamiliar tasks, unstructured social situations (e.g., enrichment centers and recess), answering questions, and independent problem solving. He did not have age/grade appropriate play skills and needed assistance interacting with his peers. For example, when Max wanted to join or play with other children, he might have loudly *zoomed* an airplane over their heads. He often used large words and complex phrases he had heard adults use such as *actually*, *prefer*, and *symmetrical*. Sadly, as a result, adults often assumed he knew more or that he had a larger vocabulary than he actually did. In fact, Max had a very limited understanding of word meanings and often did not understand words or phrases that he had *picked up* from others' conversations.

Understanding Max's strengths and weaknesses raised several concerns when considering that general and special educators have encountered the increasing challenge of working with students with autism (Schwartz, Sandall, Garfinkle, & Bauer, 1998). Further given the grim outcomes and statistics, we knew it was vital for school administrators—specifically principals—to

have insights into working with students with autism (Boyer & Lee, 2001) in order to support their educators and families. The following section provides a synthesis of the first perspective that demonstrates the dire need for principals to proactively interact with families, accept *all* students, and be an active participant in the SPED process.

Max's Case Scenario: Perspective 1

Last June, as novice public school parents, we scheduled a tour of the elementary school in our area. Before the visit, I asked Mrs. Wilson—the principal—if Max could join us. She provided a lengthy explanation why this would not be a good idea. My husband George and I arrived at the school at the appointed hour, rang the front door buzzer, and proceeded inside through a second set of locked glass doors. At that point, the administrative assistant seated at her desk on the other side of the doors, asked us to state the purpose of our visit. If she had looked up, she would have seen our smiling faces and eagerness to come inside, but she did not.

After she let us in and provided visitor badges, she told us to wait in the main office until the principal could see us. There were no chairs or magazines, so we kept ourselves occupied looking at official notices posted on a nearby bulletin board until the principal joined us about 15 minutes later. When Mrs. Wilson arrived, we proceeded with the tour. The school was still in session, so first we saw the kindergarten hall, peeked in a few classrooms, and admired student artwork on the walls. Mrs. Wilson seemed to go out of her way to let us know these were the creations of *general education students*.

On the tour, we passed several members of the school personnel and students. Mrs. Wilson did not interact with them, greet them, or make any introductions, nor did they grin or look in our direction. As we passed the health office, a nurse and an educator were attending to a nauseous child. There was a sense of mild chaos, a frantic teacher looking for the custodian, while the nurse's aide cautioned students and adults to watch their step. As we passed, Mrs. Wilson said nothing to calm the anxious students nearby, the sick child, or the staff.

As we reached the far end of the building, away from the kindergarten hall that we passed at the beginning of our tour, I began wondering what else she wanted to show us—perhaps the playground where Max and his new friends would play. I quickly realized that this was not what Mrs. Wilson had in mind. Instead, we paused and peered into two 10' by 10' classrooms, one designated for speech therapy and the other for SPED. Although inclusion has become the mantra of the reform effort to improve the education and services for students with disabilities (McLeskey, Henry, & Hodges, 1998; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995; Schmidt, Rozendal, & Greenman, 2002) the principal told us this would be Max's classroom, "a separate space where students with disabilities could be helped." Having a background in special education I could not help but think this was similar to archaic practices of segregating students with disabilities from their non disabled peers (Bredberg & Davidson, 1999; Pamelazita & Buschbacher; 2003).

My husband asked about the possibility of a kindergarten placement with SPED support. Mrs. Wilson informed us that this would not be possible. Curious, I asked, "What if paraprofessional support is written into Max's IEP?" as it was in his preschool program. Mrs. Wilson told us that "Paraprofessionals work with struggling readers in our school…not special education students." Mrs. Wilson's responses were in direct violation of facilitating inclusive environments which involves (a) guaranteeing physical access, (b) allowing an opportunity for the best possible learning and social experiences, and (c) providing a nurturing atmosphere. Without these essential structures in place, students with disabilities are denied full participation, involvement, and an equitable educational experience (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002).

Mrs. Wilson's lack of understanding about the needs of students with disabilities, SPED, IDEIA (2004), and her attitude which suggested a lack of commitment to *all* children was apparent not only in our conversation, but also in her interactions with the students and staff and their interactions with her. We made our way back to the entrance with very little conversation. As we approached the front door, Mrs. Wilson presented us with other options for Max's kindergarten experience. "You know," she said, "my school serves mostly the general education population. Your son might do better if he were with his special ed buddies at another school in the district." Stunned, we said nothing before Mrs. Wilson suggested a second more appalling option, "Max could stay home for an extra year because kindergarten isn't mandated for our state." George and I had both hoped the principal would say something to reassure us the year would be successful, but after our meeting we realized this was a high expectation.

George and I discussed the inappropriate comments the principal made and our feelings about the tour and overall climate of the school. We knew the statements and accusations went against IDEIA (2004) and NCLB (2002). We contacted the SPED director and voiced our concerns regarding Mrs. Wilson's inappropriate statements and unprofessional demeanor. We also spoke to individual members on Max's IEP team. We felt they needed to beware of the suggestions and possibility of Max attending a different school. George and I had a few weeks to think about the tour, the comments Mrs. Wilson had made, and the layout of the building, before we would meet again with the rest of the team, including Mrs. Wilson, at Max's IEP meeting. We continued to discuss the relationship between Mrs. Wilson's statements, the apparent attitudes of the staff, and the feelings we had as we walked through the hallways. We listed the pros and cons of sending Max to a school with a principal who did not appear concerned about his academic or social success, downplayed his strengths, and were not excited about having him in her building.

A few weeks after the tour, Max's IEP meeting was held. The team was comprised of individuals who had very distinct opinions about the best educational placement for Max. We discussed Max's strengths and weaknesses, wrote IEP goals and objectives, and contemplated the educational setting where Max's needs could be met. In the end, we decided Max would go to another school in the district. It was our belief and the feeling of several of the IEP team members, that Max should attend a school where he would be welcomed and accepted. Sharing Mrs. Wilson's comments helped the IEP team, as well as George and me, make this difficult decision. Even though George and I felt like all of the effort we had put into preparing Max for a general education kindergarten experience or something as close to that as possible in the neighborhood school now meant less. The following section provides a synthesis of the second perspective that demonstrates the ability of a principal to proactively interact with families, accept *all* students, and be an active participant in the SPED process in accordance with IDEIA (2004) and NCLB (2002).

Max's Case Scenario: Perspective 2

About two weeks after the IEP meeting we received a phone call from Max's new school, where he would be attending in the fall. The administrative assistant requested some additional information about Max and asked if we would like to tour the building. She also suggested that we could meet Max's SPED teacher and eat lunch with her, her students, and the principal. Though we were excited and appreciated the school extending the invitation, our previous experience led us to be anxious and nervous about the upcoming event.

The principal, Mr. Jones, greeted us at the front door. He bent down to say hello and shook Max's hand. Though Max did not make eye contact, he did stick out his hand. As we started the

tour, Mr. Jones and I walked together and George and Max walked together. Mr. Jones kept turning around including and addressing his comments and questions to them as well. We met Max's new teacher. While she talked with Max and surveyed the things he liked to do, Mr. Jones interacted with the other children in the room. From their interactions with him, it was evident that he was a frequent classroom visitor.

Toward the end of our tour, poor Max had had enough. At this point, Max ran screaming through the library. George and I were mortified and waited for Mr. Jones to share the other options that might be better suited to Max's educational needs. I braced for him to talk about another school in the district or perhaps suggest staying at home another year with mom. He smiled and waited while we soothed Max. Finally, Mr. Jones said, "Well, I can see the tour wore Max out. Let's schedule lunch for another day." Shocked and relieved, we shook hands and thanked him for the tour. He said he was excited Max would be coming to his school. He could sense our nervousness because he reassured us Max would do just fine.

Max started kindergarten in August. A couple of times I had to drop off papers that did not make it into his backpack. On these occasions I would see Mr. Jones interacting with students. Once, I saw him walking Max back to class and he was listening as if he was really interested in what Max had to say. Max had a successful kindergarten year. Although he continues to need extra help for fine motor skills, he writes beautiful stories, reads at the beginning first-grade level, and is above his peers in math. Additionally based on the Mr. Jones support, Max was ready for full inclusion with paraprofessional support by the beginning of first grade.

To help ensure the success of inclusion, it is important for principals to demonstrate behaviors that promote and advance the integration, acceptance, and success of students with disabilities in general education classes. Because of his leadership position, Mr. Jones' attitude resulted in increased opportunities for Max to be included with his general education peers. In order for inclusion to be successful, school principals must exhibit a positive attitude and commitment for the paradigm shift. Studies also show principals—similar to Mr. Jones—who possess positive attitudes and experiences are more likely to place students with disabilities in less restrictive settings (Praisner, 2003).

Each of these areas were evident throughout Max's kindergarten and first grade school experiences because Mr. Jones demonstrated the same kindness, commitment, communication skills, and leadership abilities as he did during our initial meeting. For example, at Max's annual IEP meeting, Mr. Jones not only attended, but was an active participant, sharing ideas, making recommendations, and seeking clarification. During the school year Max was invited to another student's birthday party at a local pizza parlor. Not only were all of the special education staff there, teachers and paraprofessionals, but so was Mr. Jones. He was eating pizza and playing games with the kids and socializing with the adults. These are just a few examples that demonstrate Mr. Jones's commitment and understanding for students with disabilities, families, and the SPED process.

Polar Opposites

Besides the role principals have in establishing a positive school climate and culture that promotes inclusion, these two scenarios also demonstrate the need for administrators to be aware and sensitive to the feelings and needs of families with children with a disability. For example, Max's parents' feelings and apprehensions about SPED and the IEP process are analogous with other parents facing the same situations. Many aspects of the SPED process can be taxing for parents. The actual IEP meeting is notorious for being an emotional event, lasting at least an

hour, where parents sit with professionals who analyze *all* of the *things* their child *can and cannot do*. As principals plan to assist and encourage the involvement of parents in the education of their child, it is important that the principal and other IEP team members be sensitive to the struggles and issues the families face.

Further, these two contrasting scenarios illustrate the impact a principal's overall attitude, leadership abilities, communication skills, and level of commitment have on the climate and culture of their school. Culture within a school encompasses underlying norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have been developed over time as colleagues work together, solve problems, and confront challenges (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Strong positive cultures (e.g., Mr. Jones' school) exist because there is a shared sense of what is important, a common philosophy of care and concern, and a goal of helping *all* students learn. Although school culture is one of the most significant and powerful features of any educational endeavor, many schools (e.g. Mrs. Wilson's school) lack these critical aspects because they are not seen as important or not valued.

According to Peterson and Deal (1998) culture impacts everything that takes place within the school setting including:

- How the faculty and staff dress.
- Types of conversations and collaboration.
- Their willingness to evolve and problem solve.
- Implementation of instruction, strategies, accommodations, and modifications.
- Their ability to accept diversity and teach *all* students.

This informal set of expectations and values also shapes how a community thinks, feels, and acts toward their school and their students.

The building level leadership and support principals provide has a strong direct and indirect effect on virtually all aspects of the school. Similar to Peterson and Deal (1998), Smith (2006) suggested that the combination of values, attitudes, communication abilities, and leadership skills of the principal influence the overall school culture and more importantly the level of support felt by SPED faculty and staff members. Given Mrs. Wilson's approach to SPED, it is not unimaginable to assume she holds similar views about other student subgroups that may need extra attention and support. Principals need to be aware that their attitudes and treatment of SPED programs, faculty, staff, students, and families are factors related to the abysmal attrition and retention rates (Theoharis, 2008). Moreover, emerging research throughout the past decade has demonstrated a significant relationship between SPED teacher attrition and school leadership (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Ultimately attrition and retention of special educators is largely attributed to either effective or ineffective leadership and according to Billingsley (2005) this has resulted in numerous uncertified teachers working with students who have the greatest needs.

The negative example demonstrates the significance and power of the building's culture and climate and the role of the principal when instituting the tone for an inclusive environment. School leaders at the elementary, middle, and high school levels are instrumental in shaping school culture. As seen in both scenarios, principals communicate their core values and beliefs verbally and non-verbally every day. Teachers reflect these values through their actions and words to the students in their classrooms and interactions with parents. This is unfortunate for new special educators who accept positions in buildings with leaders like Mrs. Wilson.

These educators, after a couple years of teaching, begin to forget the values instilled in them during their teacher education program (e.g., teachers have a responsibility for educating *all* children, *all* children have the right to free and appropriate public education, and *all* children can

learn) and begin to develop the values and the beliefs of their principal, in this case, that educating SPED students is someone else's responsibility. When teachers see that the principal does not believe students with disabilities should be in the building, they may begin to question "Why should difficult and challenging students be in my classroom?"

The second scenario, with Mr. Jones, is in direct contrast to the first principal, Mrs. Wilson. It provides an example of a well-developed school culture, understanding and empathy for the needs of families, and knowledge about SPED. It illustrates how a principal's leadership and communication skills can positively impact the school, faculty, staff, students, and parents. Principals, like Mr. Jones, who recognize their responsibility for the education of *all* students and serve as an educational leader for *all* faculty and staff members improve the learning opportunities for students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Moreover, the second example demonstrates a positive school climate and culture where the principal works with both general and special educators equally. In situations such as this, educators are more likely to collaborate and provide appropriate and inclusive services for students with disabilities. Research has indicated, while the services and supports provided through IDEIA (2004) have been instrumental to the academic and social successes of students with disabilities, more must be done. Educators and policy makers have come to realize SPED programs and educators alone cannot assume the responsibility of meeting the needs of *all* students. Therefore, collaboration between administrators, general and special educators, support staff, and related service providers must take place (Furney, Godek, & Riggs, 2004). For principals to ensure effective collaboration occurs and the guidelines of IDEIA (2004) are implemented, they must possess a comprehensive understanding of the SPED process. The following section provides three web-based resources which will assist principals in gaining a better perspective and increase their capacity when working with families, students with disabilities, and faculty and staff members.

Resources

One of the first steps for principals should be to understand how parents' respond when then they find out their child has a disability. Families often experience the feelings of denial, guilt, grief, and depression (Stewart & Kluwin, 2001). These feelings put a strain on family relationships and influence how family members respond to one another. Hardman, Drew, and Egan (2005) explained that each family is comprised of a unique power structure. For some families, it is the father who holds most of the power, and in other families it lies with the mother. The word *power* illustrates the amount of influence -or authority one=or-more family members exhibit in organizing and managing choices, chores, and activities.

The following web-based resources are presented to bring about greater awareness of how principals can increase their knowledge base related to family collaboration, IDEIA (2004), and accessible materials. Although there are copious other references these three were selected because of the most up-to-date and succinct information available.

Principals can find news, information, and resources about IDEIA (2004) at www.ed.gov. As noted above, federal initiatives, such as NCLB (2002), have increased accountability, raised stress levels, and heightened the demand for additional resources to encourage student success. Given this multifaceted policy atmosphere, there is acknowledgment that school principals must take on a critical role in creating a school culture that values and supports the needs of *all* learners (Furney, et al., 2004).

The Special Connections website (www.specialconnections.ku.edu) and the IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University (www.iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu) serve as resources to assist principals and educators in creating successful inclusive environments. Special Connection offers educators tools (e.g., assist teachers in implementing best practices), resources, case studies (e.g., real-world situations created to show application value of best practices), and on-line collaboration (e.g., brief look at the protocols required for video conferencing and potential applications). Each of these divisions is applied to instruction, behavior plans, collaboration, and assessment.

The Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas (www.beachcenter.org) allows principals to have access to information about how family units operate, cope, and manage when they have a child with a disability and provides an understanding of the importance of serving the whole family unit, not just the student with a disability. The Beach Center's website offers a wide range of support on a broad spectrum of topics related to the quality of life of families and individuals affected by disabilities and those who work closely with them. The website also offers research articles, real stories from professionals and family members, discussion boards, and book suggestions.

Each of these resources provides important information on topics ranging from general education curriculum to positive behavior support. Developing this awareness and becoming sensitive to the issues and needs of families with children with disabilities should help principals know what to say or not to say in difficult moments and will assist them in making conscious decisions that are productive for the entire family.

Similarly being aware of the needs of families and knowing how to communicate effectively with them, principals also need to understand their role in the IEP process. Each of these web-based resources provides principals with comprehensive knowledge and skills that will assist them in performing essential SPED leadership tasks (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Principals who have an understanding of their role and responsibility as team members, as well as having knowledge about SPED laws and procedures, will help ensure the IEP meeting is effective and productive. A school administrator serves as the member responsible for knowing the general curriculum and should be knowledgeable of SPED services. Moreover, as demonstrated by Mr. Jones, the principal can then assist in making recommendations about the least restrictive environment and in writing IEP goals and objectives that reflect a link between the general education curriculum and the students' needs. Untimely the principal's role in the development of IEP is critical to ensure *all* students with disabilities are treated equitably and provided the support needed to be successful academically, socially, and behaviorally.

Conclusion

The experiences our family had on the tours and meeting two different school leaders provides an opportunity for principals to learn. Understanding the need for good communication (e.g., expressive and receptive) and the impact it has on the environment of the school, families (e.g., with and without children with disabilities), and how students will be accepted and educated in the building is a critical component in the success achieved (e.g., socially and academically) for students with disabilities. According to LaFasto and Larson (2001) "action is more likely to succeed than inaction" (p. 21). Action-oriented principals are vital to the success of the school, families, and *all* students. As seen with Mrs. Wilson, the faculty and parents will not be able to solve problems or work effectively without an effective leader. Whereas principals who reflect on these two experiences, review the information and resources provided, and continue to

pursue professional development options will increase the overall success of his or her school (LaFasto & Larson, 2001).

Mr. Jones was as busy and had the same responsibility as all other principals. However, he made choices (e.g., such as attending birthday parties) which helped build relationships with educators, students, and families which simultaneously strengthened the culture of the school. The role of school leaders in the development of culture is all-encompassing. Peterson and Deal (1998) explained "their words, their nonverbal messages, their actions, and their accomplishments all shape culture. They are models, potters, poets, actors, and healers. They are historians and anthropologists. They are visionaries and dreamers" (p. 30). Without the awareness of principals, school cultures can become poisonous and unproductive. The opposite is also true: principals who pay close attention to the culture and climate of their school can assist in the establishment of a strong foundation in success and the acceptance of change (Gaincola & Hutchinson, 2005).

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