

## Trust in Administration: How Administrators Relate to Parents of Students with Disabilities

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### Abstract

Parental trust in school administration was significantly related to parental involvement in the classroom (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005). In special education, parental trust was identified "...as a foundational element in many issues involving conflict between parties" (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 244). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine interactions between elementary school principals and parent(s) of students with special learning needs from the perspective of the parent(s) to determine principal behaviors that fostered a trusting relationship. The authors utilized a conceptual framework based on research by Tschannen-Moran (2004) that identified five key components of trust. Parental responses were categorized based on these five components to determine elementary principal behaviors that foster trust.

**Keywords:** trust, special education, parent involvement, administration

The accountability era altered the American public school system by challenging the core values and beliefs held by educators since its inception about who could learn and at what levels they could achieve. Both state and national legislation enacted during the last two decades such as the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), based on the premise that “all students can learn at high levels” (Jones & Whitford, 1997, p. 277) and the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which mandated that disadvantaged students learn and achieve at the same rate as their peers, placed primary responsibility for the achievement of all students on the schools and districts which served them (Thurlow, 2000; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011).

Prior to 1990, educational reform focused on students mastering basic skills, and student achievement was measured primarily through minimum competency examinations (McLaughlin & Rhin, 2007). Beginning in the 1990s, the focus of educational reform became a standards based framework—what students should know and be able to perform at a proficient level (Thurlow, 2000). While NCLB allowed states to determine what proficiency meant, the level had to be the same for all students regardless of demography (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011).

Additionally, many states began adopting a national core of standards in the areas of English/language arts, mathematics, and literacy which for many states led to an increasingly more rigorous curriculum experience for K-12 students (Hill, 2011). These curricular increases coupled with an accountability system that financially sanctioned schools and districts not meeting average yearly progress (AYP) demands created an environment in public schools where administrators and teachers could no longer afford to maintain the status quo, but had to instead ensure equitable learning experiences for all students through differentiated instruction that included all stakeholders in the educational process (Stephenson, 2006; Thurlow, 2000).

### *Rationale for the Study*

For educators, meeting the accountability demands of educational legislation aimed at securing equitable learning and assessment opportunities for all student populations necessitated utilization of all available resources (Lee, 2006). One resource that had been overlooked was parent involvement even though studies demonstrated the importance of parental involvement for “...pushing the system to higher standards” (Machen et al., 2005, p. 15). A lack of parent involvement in children’s education has been “strongly related” to

lower achievement in reading (Reglin, Cameron, & Losike-Sedimo, 2012, p. 17). In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) mandated that parents of students with special learning needs be included in the planning and execution of their child's education as a member of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) Team (Conroy, Yell, Katsiyannis, & Collins, 2010, Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). Lawmakers recognized the importance of including parents in educational decision making (Conroy et al., 2010, Yell et al., 2009).

There were many things schools could do to encourage the involvement of parents in their child's educational experiences and schools (Machen et al., 2005). Possibly one of the most important was establishing and maintaining relationships built on trust between parents and educators (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The more parents trusted the people who worked most closely with their children and the administrators who supervised them, the more they wanted to participate in their child's classroom and school. Trusting relationships allowed the participants to relax and focus on the important educational issues rather than being on the defensive and focusing on protecting rights and positions as participants did in relationships characterized by distrust.

As leaders in schools and districts, there was much administrators could do to foster trusting relationships with the parents of students with special learning needs. By fostering trusting relationships with parents, administrators could affect not only the way they interacted with parents, but could through modeling and policy have an impact on the relationships of other staff members with parents as well.

### *Study Question*

In considering the potential impact of trusting relationships between school administration and parents of students with special learning needs on student achievement, the authors identified a question concerning fostering trusting relationships with both stakeholder groups. What were specific administrator behaviors that fostered trusting relationships with parents of students with special learning needs?

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine interactions between elementary school principals and parent(s) of students with special learning needs from the perspective of the parent(s) to determine principal behaviors that fostered a trusting relationship. The authors utilized a conceptual framework based on research by Tschannen-Moran (2004) that identified five key components of trust. Parental responses were categorized based on these

five components to determine elementary principal behaviors that fostered trusting relationships.

## Literature Review

### *Trust Defined*

For the purposes of this study, trust was defined according to the framework established by Tschannen-Moran (2004) as a willing “vulnerability” to another based on the belief that the other person is “...benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (p. 19). In this definition of trust, an individual has been given reason to trust and would not be considered “gullible” or “innocent”—trust is a rational decision (Phillips, 2002, p. 3). Even with evidence supporting trust, however, it should be noted that there are no absolutes. “Trust is a judgment based on evidence, but it outstrips the evidence that would rationally justify it” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 16). Trust also increases and is developed more rapidly when individuals have experiences where the person they trusted proves to be trustworthy (Phillips, 2002). Using the framework for this study, trust would be established through experiences where administrators demonstrated benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competency in their relationships with parents and students.

Parents who believed in the benevolence of administrators believed that their child’s best interests were at the forefront of decisions and that their child would be treated fairly and compassionately (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Of particular importance to parents was the belief that school officials “know” their child; this perceived relationship had a direct impact on the relationship between school officials and the parent (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008, p. 247). When parents perceived their child’s needs were not being met and their child was not valued, not only was trust not established, conflict was the result (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). When a parent did not believe school personnel were acting in their child’s best interests, interactions with them were unproductive as the parents expended all of their energy “...making mental provisions or alternate plans or in assessing the available recourse in case of betrayal” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 19). When parents perceived administrators were making decision based on the best interests of their child, they (parents) assumed the role of partner or team player with the school in securing their child’s education.

Parents who believed in the honesty of administrators believed that administrators kept their word, whether it was written or spoken (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). In contrast, when

administrators were only partially honest either in an attempt to avoid conflict or to make an excuse for an action, the relationship was damaged (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). An example of this in special education was when parents believed their requests for services were denied based on fiscal reasons rather than the reasons given by administrators (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008). Trust was established or maintained when administrators owned their unpopular decisions rather than making excuses based on half-truths. While parents might have disagreed with the decision, they trusted the person who made it.

Administrators demonstrated openness by “making themselves vulnerable” through communication and shared decision making that fostered reciprocal behaviors in parents (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 25). This required a relinquishing of control and empowerment of multiple stakeholders. Frequent, open discussion tended to breed trust and facilitate compromise (Roach & Salisbury, 2006). Effective administrators sought diverse opinions from students, parents, and teachers before making important decisions (DiPaolo, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2008). Conversely, lack of communication or misunderstanding of communication escalated conflict in relationships (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Also, openness in a relationship did not exempt school personnel from their ethical obligation to maintain confidentiality, which led to distrust (Beard & Brown, 2008).

Reliability as a facet of trust related to predictability, dependability, and consistency (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Phillips, 2002). To be considered reliable, consistency was exhibited between personal beliefs and behavior as well as between school goals and behavior (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Administrators not only talked the talk; they walked the walk for parents to trust them.

Competence referred to an individual’s ability to perform “...according to appropriate standards” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 30). Trusted individuals were honest about ability and worked to maintain or improve ability (Beard & Brown, 2008). It was important to parents of students with special learning needs that administrators were knowledgeable about special education policies and procedures at a school and district level as well as the laws at the state and federal level that provided the foundation for them.

### *Relationship of Parent Involvement to Student Achievement*

Parent involvement was identified as a factor in improving student achievement and behavior (Machen et al., 2005; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Gould, 2011;

Reglin et al., 2012). Parents were instrumental in developing positive attitudes about school and education in students (Gould, 2011), providing them with their first opportunities to learn and socialize (DePlanty et al., 2007). Once students entered school, parents continued to support their endeavors through volunteering in their classroom, attending school meetings, and providing homework support. The effects of parental involvement in homework support were magnified by participation in school based parent training programs (Bailey, 2006; Reglin et al., 2012). Parent involvement was valued by teachers, parents, and students as a component of student success (DePlanty et al., 2007).

While parent involvement was a factor in student achievement, schools were not required to solicit parent input in any part of the educational process for students in general education. However, schools were mandated by IDEA to include parents in decision making in all phases of the evaluation and IEP process for students with learning and behavior disabilities (Lake & Billingsley, 1997; Yell et. al., 2009). IEP meetings were affected by the relationships parents had with current and past school personnel and the relationships school personnel had with each other (Esquivel et al., 2008). School personnel were able to maintain positive relationships with parents by treating them as partners in the process, by showing them respect, and by listening to their ideas (Fish, 2008).

### *Special Education Issues that Influenced Trusting Relationships*

One issue cited by parents of students with special learning needs that caused dissatisfaction with their child's school was when they felt their child's strengths were not considered by Individual Education Program (IEP) team. (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Students with special learning needs were taught from a "deficit model perspective" based on limitations associated with their disabilities and were not taught with the same high expectations as their peers without disabilities (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Parrish & Stodden, 2009). Over time, parents became distrustful of school personnel they believed were not basing educational decisions on their child as an individual (Shelden, et. al., 2010). As the instructional leader of the school and immediate supervisor of classroom teachers, principals were in a position to influence this perspective by requiring that all IEP goals and benchmarks and all classroom instruction be data driven and based on content standards for all students regardless of disability (DiPaolo et al., 2004).

In addition to "discrepant views of a child's needs", Lake and Billingsley (2000, p. 244) identified seven additional "...factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special

education” (p. 240). These included lack of problem-solving knowledge among school personnel and parents, service delivery issues, financial constraints, parent belief that their child was not valued, power struggles, communication issues, and trust issues. The study highlighted the importance of responding to conflict quickly before trust is broken and protecting the trust relationship.

The problem-solving process was also highlighted in a study that investigated principal responses to parents over complex special education issues. Zaretsky (2004), asserted that parents identified “...devaluing or dismissal of their contributions to problem-solving processes...” as the “...most common source of conflict...” in the relationship (p.65). Many parents in this study also identified the principal not being willing to compromise or listen to different perspectives as issues as well.

### *Principal Effectiveness and Inclusion*

At the heart of all special education legislation was the notion of least restrictive environment which sparked the debate over inclusion and how to provide equitable access of educational opportunity to all students regardless of disability (Gordon, 2006). A key component of an inclusive school community was the effectiveness of the principal in creating a culture that valued each individual student and sought continuous improvement in instructing and assessing students with disabilities. Principals accomplished this by making academic achievement for all students the mission of the school and by establishing school norms that supported the mission (DiPaolo et al., 2004).

Principals who maintained inclusive school communities were effective communicators who involved all stakeholders in the school improvement process (Roach & Salisbury, 2006). Forging positive working relationships was central to this effort. Principals also shaped the process by getting different stakeholders together so they could establish shared beliefs (Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). Principals were not only working directly with faculty and staff, but they also intervened and facilitated during times of miscommunication and conflict between school personnel and families of children with disabilities (DiPaolo et al., 2004). Responsive leadership that solved problems was integral in creating a supportive inclusive educational environment for all students (Crockett, 2002).

### *Principal Role in Student Achievement*

Research linked principal leadership and student achievement (Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013; Knoepfel & Rinehart, 2008; Soehner & Ryan, 2011; Johnson, Jr. & Uline, 2005). Principals who facilitated a shared vision and continuous focus on academic success for all students in their schools impacted student achievement in a positive way (Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013; Soehner & Ryan, 2011; Johnson, Jr. & Uline, 2005). Another key principal behavior was empowering teachers through continuous, ongoing, job-embedded professional development and creating an atmosphere of trust that encouraged risk taking behavior in instruction (Johnson, Jr. & Uline, 2005). Effective principals observed teachers in the classroom daily and modeled best instructional practices while helping teachers solve student learning problems. In addition, principals in successful schools hired teachers who were willing to collaborate and learn and removed teachers who were ineffective (Johnson, Jr. & Uline, 2005).

### Methods

Based on the research questions and stated purpose of the study to examine the questions from the perspective of parents of students with special learning needs, qualitative research methods were employed. The researchers held paradigmatic views about the social construction of knowledge and sought to understand the complexity of the relationship through direct interaction with parents who were currently involved in the relationship (Creswell, 2003). These parents served as the primary data sources for the study. In addition to structured interviews conducted with parents, students' Individual Education Plans and school and district special education policy were analyzed and compared to parent responses when appropriate for triangulation purposes.

### *Sample*

Participants for this study were parents of elementary school students who have special learning needs in a small school district in a southern state. Procedures to secure a random sample were employed to maximize the generalizability of the study (Abowitz & Toole, 2010). Three hundred and fifty letters which described the study and invited parents/guardians to participate with an attached informed consent document were mailed to the homes of all parents of students with special learning needs who attended one of the five elementary schools in the district. Nine parents and one grandparent contacted the lead



researcher requesting additional information about the study. Of these 10, five mothers and one grandmother volunteered to participate in the study. The mothers ranged in age from 45 to 52. The grandmother was 55. Their education levels ranged from completion of seventh grade to completion of a doctorate (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Demographics of Parent Participants*

| Parent | Age | Gender | Marital Status | Occupation                | Education     | Child Age | Child Gender |
|--------|-----|--------|----------------|---------------------------|---------------|-----------|--------------|
| 1      | 52  | F      | S              | Stay at Home Mom          | High School   | 10        | M            |
| 2      | 52  | F      | M              | University Researcher     | Ed. D.        | 10        | M            |
| 3      | 46  | F      | S              | Housekeeper               | Seventh Grade | 11        | M            |
| 4      | 45  | F      | M              | Part Time Communications  | MA            | 6         | M            |
| 5      | 55  | F      | S              | Unemployed Factory Worker | GED           | 11        | M            |
| 6      | 43  | F      | M              | Stay at Home Mom          | BS            | 12        | F            |

Participants received informed consent documents in the mail prior to volunteering to participate in the study. Many participants signed and returned these documents in the self-addressed stamped envelope that was provided. Although some of the participants had already signed informed consent documents, each interview began with the interviewer providing a second copy of the informed consent document and explaining its contents to the participant. Participants were encouraged to ask questions relating to the informed consent. Participants were reminded that they had the right to refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any time without any harmful effects. This continual renegotiation of informed consent at each phase of the data collection process was conducted in an effort to facilitate a more flexible and open "...researcher-researched relationship" (McDonnell, Jones, & Read, 2000, p. 386).

### *Context*

Interviews were conducted at the local library in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The interviews took place on four dates between February and August of 2012. Each participant had a child that was attending one of the five elementary schools in the district during that time. Many of the children were identified at an early age and attended the district preschool as well. Many of the participants had older children who had attended the same school as their sibling. Some of those children also received services for special

learning needs. All of the participants drew on experiences with multiple administrators in answering questions.

### *Data Analysis*

Structured qualitative protocols were established which included conducting recorded interviews that were transcribed producing data elements of the questions and answers (Johnson, Dunlap, & Benoit, 2010). Denaturalized transcription methods sustained the accuracy of the interview and eliminated reader bias based on grammatical patterns of speech and the distraction of involuntary vocalizations (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). The initial interviews were conducted with both researchers present to ensure the same protocols were employed in each interview. While it was not possible to anticipate every probe that might be needed, the researchers discussed listening strategies in order to ask appropriate questions that would allow participants to discuss their experiences and perceptions fully (Johnson et.al, 2010). Transcripts were analyzed looking for themes that emerged throughout participant responses and identifying textual evidence that represented these themes (Johnson et. al, 2010). Researcher bias was minimized through reflexive conversations between researchers and personal introspection throughout the interview, transcription, and analysis processes.

Document analysis of district special education policy and procedures and the Individual Education Programs (IEPs) of students whose parents participated in the study were conducted for triangulation purposes. For example, one interview question asked parents whether or not they believed their child's school implemented their child's IEP fully. Parents were asked to recount instances that supported their claim. The IEP and district policy were reviewed to determine if the evidence provided by the parent was required of the school or district to be in compliance.

### *Validity and Reliability*

Validity was established by choosing components of trust that had been operationally defined in previous research regarding trusting relationships established by school administrators (Abowitz & Toole, 2010). Questions were developed to investigate the depth and quality of the relationship parents of students with special learning needs had with administrators in their child's school and district from the parents' perspectives. The questions allowed parents to share experiences from the time that they suspected their child

had a disability, through identification, development of the IEP, and school provided services. Probes were developed for some questions to enable participants to describe their experiences entirely and ensure measurement validity (Abowitz & Toole, 2010; Johnson et.al, 2010). Measurement reliability was established by developing interview protocols and a script that was utilized in every interview by both researchers (Abowitz & Toole, 2010).

## Findings

This section of the paper presented the data acquired through naturalized transcription of the interviews and analysis of the documents. They were organized according to the framework established by Tschannen-Moran (2004) that defined trust based on based on the belief that the other person is "...benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (p. 19) and other themes that emerged through inductive data analysis and were supported by the overall data set.

### *Benevolence*

Overall, parents reported little contact with administrators through identification, in ARC meetings, and in the development and implementation of IEPs. Analysis of the district special education procedures manual revealed no mention of school level administration participating in IEP meetings; however, a district level representative was mandated at every IEP meeting.

Parents involved administrators when they were concerned about the services their child was receiving or issues with their child's teachers and reported favorable results from administrator involvement. Other issues parents brought to administrators included concerns about noncertified school staff, disciplinary measures used with their child, and bullying. In each instance, parents reported feeling that the administrator really had their child's best interests at heart when making decisions. One parent discussed problems she encountered when making a teacher request for the subsequent school year and the intervention of the director for special education in the interest of her child.

I was very concerned about who his first grade teacher would be because they sent this letter home the last minute saying you've got to get it in by Friday. You can pick three teachers but not put them in any order, and they only had five. So, I'm scribbling all over this thing, "What's the point? I can choose three not in any order out of five." When the principal saw it, I'm sure it did not win me any friends. So I

probably went in [ARC meeting] with a black mark. But I had developed such a relationship with them [ARC] to the point that the special education director said to me, “Now don’t tell anyone I did this,” trying to find out where \_\_\_\_\_ [son] had been assigned, trying to advocate for the teacher that he ended up getting...So the relationship was actually that good that they went out of their way right in front of me to make sure that \_\_\_\_\_ [son] got the teacher that we all wanted for him.

While all of the parents reported believing that administrators had their child’s best interests at heart when making decisions, three parents revealed concern about bringing issues to the principal for fear their child might suffer repercussions. One parent discussed making the decision whether or not to involve the principal in a situation she was trying to resolve with her son’s teacher.

I just want to be really, really, really careful that when I cry, “Help!” I really need help. That I really, really, *really* need help. And that I really need her to understand that I need help. Does that make sense? I need her to intervene. Because when I ask her, understand that she is going to be compelled to do something about it. So I want to make absolutely sure that when that happens it is for the right reasons, it is for the right things, and to mitigate any consequences that there will be for \_\_\_\_\_ [son] and \_\_\_\_\_ [younger son].

Parents trust in administration increased when the administrator demonstrated knowing their child. One parent discussed an incident that made an impression.

I like \_\_\_\_\_ School; I like it a lot. One of the things that impressed me with my principal is a couple of years back, we were in there for some function they were having, and she walked by and said, “Hello \_\_\_\_\_ [son’s name].” And that really surprised me with all of the students in that place, and I said something about it, and she said, “I know every one of these kids. I know every one of their names and who they are.” And that impressed me a lot.

### *Honesty*

Parents understood the limits of confidentiality particularly as it related to children other than their own, but they appreciated an open door policy where administrators welcomed their questions and disclosed what they were able to disclose. One parent

described the conversation she had with the school principal after her child witnessed another child being removed from the school by a police officer.

When I came and asked about it, she took me in her office and explained what she could about it. I needed to know, and she understood that I needed to know what had happened, what my son could have been exposed to just for my own peace of mind, and to understand the policies of the school...I respected that she took it seriously enough to let me ask about it and to tell me what she could.

### *Openness*

The majority of parent comments focused on negative experiences associated with this component of trust. Parents felt it was difficult to establish initial relationships with principals. Parents felt the burden for establishing the relationship fell on them completely. One parent discussed her initial impressions of her child's principal.

I just immediately did not like her. She never really tried to build a relationship with me. I was there a lot; I was around a lot. I said wonderful things about teachers, but she didn't seem to care. You know the superintendent seemed to care more than she did.

Parents did report that once they initiated the connection, the relationship became reciprocal. One parent stated, "I did not get along with the principal at first, but we've gotten to know each other, and it is much better. Another parent described feeling like the administration initially viewed her as a nuisance.

I think it's better now that I've developed a relationship with the current school. They're probably like, "Oh here comes \_\_\_\_\_'s mom." They know I'm not against them. It's just that I want to advocate the best for my son and the best that we can do.

### *Reliability*

Most parents reported that principals were committed to their espoused values of doing what was best for all children in their building. One parent described the principal's consistency in dealing with students.

I've seen her [principal] do things that are in the best interests of the kids. I probably have more dealings with other issues relating to kids that let me know that one, she is

very interested, and two, she is very committed to making sure things go well for all kids, and I appreciate that.

### *Competence*

Parent comments reflected more confidence in the competence of teachers than administrators in special education matters that impacted their child. One parent said, "I trust the teachers more than I do the principal. I talk to more of the teachers. The teachers are very good at what they are doing."

Half of the parents disagreed with evaluation results presented by an administrator during IEP meetings. One parent stated, "It was OK for us to disagree because it didn't really have an impact on the treatment plan, and I knew she wasn't really going to be involved."

Another parent reported the mixed reaction of the administrator and the teachers to her son's evaluation results.

She called us to her office and said, "I wanted to call you because I think that you are going to be surprised and not necessarily in a good way." Now what was interesting about that was not only were we surprised, but everybody that knew \_\_\_\_\_ [son] was surprised. Everybody. So we questioned those results. Now whether we should or not, or whether we are parents, or whether we are emotionally involved, I would say yes to all of that...but I don't think those results are accurate and in talking to the teachers, they didn't either.

An analysis of the district special education procedures manual revealed that these parents could have requested an independent evaluation.

A parent is entitled to one (1) independent educational evaluation at public expense each time the \_\_\_\_\_ conducts an evaluation with which the parent disagrees...If the parent obtains an independent educational evaluation at public or private expense, and it meets the agency criteria, the results of the evaluation shall be considered by the \_\_\_\_\_ School District in any decision made with respect to the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to the child ( \_\_\_\_\_ School District, 2008, p. 64).

### Discussion and Conclusion

A major finding of this study was that while parents reported they believed administrators were working in the best interests of their child, some parents worried about

repercussions when they approached principals with concerns for their child. Parents did not report that this had happened in the past; it was a fear for a future event. Parents also did not report whether they were concerned that the repercussions would come from administration, teachers, or noncertified personnel. One repercussion parents could have feared was principals would not view their child as favorably as they had prior to the parent reporting the concern. Parents could have feared that this would lead to the principal not making decisions based on their child's best interests. Another fear could have been that by going over the teacher's head to someone who had more authority over their child but little contact, the relationship between the teacher and their child might have been damaged. This could explain the cost/benefit analysis some parents seemed to engage in when deciding whether or not to approach school based administrators with an issue.

Parents expressed no fear of repercussion for their child when going over the head of the school based administration to address concerns with district level administration. One reason for this could have been that the director of special education for the district attended some of the IEP meetings for their child while parents reported principals never attended IEP meetings for their child. Parents could infer district administration care more about their child than school based administration. Another reason could have been that district level administrators carried more authority in hiring and firing personnel than school based administrators, so parents worried less about repercussions from those with less authority than district level administrators. While parents may perceive district level administration participation in IEP meetings as a higher level of concern for them and their child, district special education policy mandated this participation while making no mention of school level administration.

Another finding of this study was that parents of students with special learning needs understood and appreciated confidentiality laws which protected their child. However, on occasion parents needed to ask the principal for information that they believed might be confidential. This might have been because their child's disability inhibited the child from fully explaining incidents that occurred, and they depended on school administrators to clarify what their child reported to them.

Another finding of this study was that parents felt it was important to have a positive relationship with school administration, but they (parents) had to take the first steps in building that relationship. This could be because parents anticipated possible problems that required administrative intervention, and parents wanted to ensure the principal respected

their point of view. In their eagerness to establish the relationship, parents may have acted before the administrator had time to initiate the relationship.

This study also revealed that parents were not as concerned with the competence of the school principal with regards to special education policy and procedures as they were with classroom teachers. This could be because parents perceived administration had little impact on their child's daily routine.

### *Limitations*

This study was limited by the small number of participants who all had children who attended school in the same district. Future work examining the experiences of parents of students with disabilities with school and district administration should be conducted in different districts to see if common themes emerge. Another limitation was that the primary data was self-reported making verification difficult. Attempts were made to verify some parent statements through document analysis of IEPs and school and district special education policy. Future work could also analyze student progress reports and grades as added verification.

### *Recommendations*

This study raised serious considerations about facilitating trusting relationships for principals who work with parents of students with special learning needs. With these considerations in mind, the following recommendations could increase the ability of administrators to create and maintain these types of relationships.

1. When parents meet with principals to discuss concerns, principals need to meet with all stakeholders to develop a plan of action, then follow up with teachers and parents to ensure all stakeholders are working in the best interests of the child. This will help alleviate any trepidation parents might feel about repercussions their child might experience as a result of their (parents') intervention. Principals need to contact parents periodically to make sure the concern has been resolved and continues to be resolved.

2. Principals need to know the students in their building who have special learning needs and build positive relationships with both students and parents. They should be proactive in contacting parents of students with special learning needs in times of high anxiety for families such as transition from school to school, progress reporting, and high stakes



testing. One way to accomplish this could be by making home visits in the summer with the families of incoming students with special needs who do not have a prior connection to the school through siblings. Another way could be scheduling a school visit for the family of the student with special needs to view the facilities and answer questions.

3. School administrators need to avoid the appearance of hiding behind confidentiality laws to get out of tough conversations. Administrators need to answer all parent questions honestly and disclose as much requested information as possible while maintaining confidentiality to protect all children.

4. While it is important for school administrators to be knowledgeable about special education policy and procedure, principals need to capitalize on parents' trust in teacher competence with their students with special learning needs. One way this can be accomplished is through providing professional development opportunities that address the specific learning needs of individual students in their classroom. Also, principals can provide release time for teachers to collaborate with parents and special educators.

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