What is this research about?
This study examined principal’s perceptions of what it means to provide leadership in special education: the roles they must assume to support special education programming, and their professional development needs in this area.

What did the researchers do?
Urban, suburban, and rural schools with a diverse mix of racial and ethnic groups were included in this study. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 6 elementary school principals and 2 secondary school principals from a large school board in Ontario. Each principal had been in an administrative role for at least two years and worked in schools with high concentrations of special needs students. The data was analysed and common themes were identified.

What you need to know:
Principals report that they take on many roles to support special education programming in their schools and pointed to a need for more training in the area of special education programming. In particular, principals reported a need for more professional training in areas such as: the legal aspects of special education, linking exceptionality to specific instructional methods, and how best to coordinate special education services.

What did the researchers find?
Roles related to special education programming were numerous and included supporting classroom teachers and special education teachers in the development of individualized programming, promoting effective communication, arranging relevant training activities for staff and the
coordination of all services under the special education umbrella.

Principals saw themselves as coaches, encouraging the staff to promote high expectations and success for all students, fostering a culture of teacher leadership and shared responsibility for student achievement.

Fulfilling the legal requirements of special education programs was a concern for many Principals, who spoke of their need to know and understand the legal aspects of special education.

Principals indicated that the following issues challenged their ability to provide effective leadership in special education:

- limited budgets for specialized resources;
- lack of time to devote to special education leadership;
- accessing assistive technologies, specialized devices, or computer programs that allowed special needs students to maximize their learning opportunities.

All eight participants spoke of their need for ongoing professional development in order to lead special education programs confidently within their schools.

**How can you use this research?**
School administrators will want to consult the larger body of research on leadership in special education and may wish to consider the following:

- Scheduling time for special education leadership;
- seeking out further professional development opportunities in the area of special education—particularly those that will build understanding about the legal aspects of offering special education programs;
- developing ongoing connections and dialogue with other administrators in schools offering special education programming to share information, ideas and special education resources;
- developing a special education team within their school that meets
regularly to discuss programming, the latest assistive technologies, and any changes to legal requirements and procedures;

Furthermore, school boards and education policy makers will also want to consider the wider body of research on leadership in special education and may wish to consider:

- offering professional development for principals in the area of special education programming, with a particular focus on the legal requirements of special education programming;

- creating incentives for administrators in high-needs schools to connect with one another to share their experience of administering special education programs.

Original article:
To learn more about this study, we invite you to read the original research article:


About the researchers
At the time this research article was published:

Lindy Zaretsky was Superintendent of Student Services and Leadership and Staff Development for the Simcoe County District School Board in Ontario. Zaretsky’s research focus was on special education, educational leadership and social justice.

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About this summary

The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.

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