

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

School administrators are responsible for ensuring appropriate educational opportunities for all of the students served in their schools. In order to administer special education programs and services properly, they must have knowledge of special education law. This study examined the factors which influence school administrators' knowledge of special education law. This chapter includes a response to the research question, a discussion of the results and their meaning, and directions for further study.

### Response to the Research Question

Of the five independent variables, only two entered the step-wise regression equation to explain variance in the dependent variable, knowledge of special education law. The first to enter was special education courses ( $\beta = .22$ ). It accounted for 4% of the variation in knowledge. School law courses entered next ( $\beta = -.12$ ) and accounted for an additional 1% in variation in knowledge of special education law.

### Discussion

Several studies have documented the less than adequate levels of knowledge of the law which governs the education of students with disabilities. Why is this trend not changing? Are attempts to improve the law knowledge of school administrators not in place or have attempts been made which were not effective? Could it be that the law governing students with disabilities is at a level which is so complex as to be considered beyond the reach of school administrators who are under increasing pressure to apply maximum effort to improve test scores? If the complexity of this law is such that it eludes the best efforts of school administrators, does this support the continued reliance on a centralized system for special education support? Or is it possible to improve the levels of knowledge of school administrators? If effective changes are to be made in the level of knowledge of school administrators, variables which can explain higher levels of

knowledge must be identified. This study investigated five factors which were identified in the literature review and supported by surveying school administrators as most likely to influence special education law knowledge. Of these five factors, only one was found to have significant influence on higher levels of knowledge. The number of special education courses completed had a significant influence on the knowledge scores of school administrators. A negative correlation was found with respect to the number of school law courses completed. However, the restricted response range makes the generalization of this finding unwise.

Three independent variables never entered the step-wise regression equation, i.e., school level, administrative position and years of experience. The results indicate that the variation in levels of knowledge cannot be explained by these three factors. Bagnato (1990) had found that 8.6% of the variance in knowledge of the law could be explained by position when she examined school administrators in New York State. In the present study, it was not significant whether the administrator was a principal or an assistant principal. Robertson (1996) had found that elementary principals in Dade County, Florida had significantly higher levels of knowledge than high school administrators. Whether the administrator served in an elementary, middle or high school did not have an impact in the present study. In addition, the number of years one worked as a school administrator was not significant. This was also unexpected as an administrator might be expected to know more about special education law as they have more experiences which require their understanding of it. While Theller (1995) had found a positive correlation between experience and knowledge among elementary principals and supervisors in Ohio, Hines (1993) had found a negative correlation when investigating principals and their designates. The concept of more experience leading to higher levels of knowledge, however, was not supported by this study.

## Directions for Further Study

### Special Education Courses

The number of special education courses completed had a significant impact on the ability of the respondent to answer survey questions correctly. The more special education courses completed, the higher the knowledge score. Yet only 4% of the variation in knowledge could be explained by special education course work. This was significant and certainly could be sufficient to encourage administrators to complete special education courses to improve their knowledge of the law. Of the respondents, 33% reported that they had not completed a special education course and 7% reported that they had completed 10 or more special education courses. There was a wide variation in the course work in special education among the administrators. Part of this variance can be explained by the lack of any special education requirement for Virginia school administrators which results in some administrators choosing to take these courses while others choose not to take them. The question remains as to why some school administrators choose to take special education courses. The results suggest that making the completion of special education courses a requirement for Virginia school administrators could lead to higher levels of special education law knowledge.

New amendments. Although P.L.105-17 was signed on the fourth of June 1997, no federal regulations or Virginia regulations are available many months later. Do principals who have inadequate knowledge of special education law rely on knowledge of the regulations? If so, are they able to operate their schools in compliance with the law during periods of time when the regulations are not updated? The number of complaints made on behalf of children with disabilities could be compared during times of updated regulations with times when regulations are awaiting revision. In addition, it would be useful to know if administrators' scores are high or low by category.

Principal certification. Explanation of four percent of the variance in school administrators' knowledge of special education law was based upon special education

courses completed. This is a variable which can be manipulated, that is, school administrators can choose to take special education courses. What is the burden for administrators in different parts of Virginia if they choose to take a special education course? Factors may include travel, time, money, and district support. The results of this study support the consideration of a requirement of special education law course work for principal certification in Virginia.

Content and timing of courses. The quality of special education courses completed and the role of the elapsed time between the completion of the courses and the response to the survey instrument are also areas for further study. Is the amount of time between the completion of course work and the response to the survey significant? If there had been a significant amount of time between the last special education course taken, would knowledge be lower when compared with those who have recently completed a course?

It may be valuable to know more about special education courses. What is the role of the state department of education and colleges/universities in training administrators? Are there courses available to school administrators which prepare them for the responsibilities they face in their schools each day? Are special education courses designed to empower the school administrator to comply with the law? Are courses designed to give the administrator the necessary tools to work with the law rather than feeling constrained by the law? How much variation exists between special education courses that are taught in terms of curriculum, objectives, and expected outcomes? Interviews with principals could reveal information about how long ago courses were completed, what was the content of the courses, and what grades were earned. Surveying faculty in different schools of education could provide data for comparison.

Generally, what types of training are most effective to adults who need to know the law? Are courses more effective than periodic reviews and updates which are short and to the point? Do administrators learn more in internships with a knowledgeable mentor? Or

does the training matter if administrators know that they have central office resources to assist them with complex issues?

### School Law Courses

It is interesting to note that the law courses variable had an inverse correlation with knowledge. As the number of law courses completed increased, the knowledge score decreased. This was unexpected and may have been the result of a large number of responses (82.3%) falling within a restricted range (1-2). If a wider variability of scores were to occur, it would allow for a more significant magnitude. Due to the restriction of range, these findings do not suggest avoiding school law courses if one wants to raise their level of knowledge of special education law. There may have been other factors which may have had an influence on this inverse correlation. What is the role of special education in school law courses? If some of the respondents had studied law before becoming school administrators, they may have reported higher numbers of law courses completed without ever having studied special education law. Their strong law background could mislead some school administrators to believe that they did not have to seek more specific knowledge of special education law. This could have resulted in lower knowledge scores yet higher numbers of law courses completed.

Course content and timing. The content of school law courses may or may not emphasize special education law. The few respondents who reported higher numbers of law courses completed may have actually had limited instruction in special education law. Is there a consistency in the content of school law courses? What is the variation in the content in these courses? Is there a significant variation in the content over time? Does it matter how much time has elapsed since the course work was completed? What factors could account for the large number of administrators reporting one and two law courses? Were one to two school law courses included in the required program of studies completed by most of the school administrators practicing in Virginia?

### School Administrators

At least ninety-five percent of the variance in school administrators' knowledge of special education law remains unexplained and requires further study. This study did not investigate the attitudes of school administrators toward the highly prescriptive law which governs students with disabilities. Johnson (1989) investigated principals' attitudes toward mainstreaming as the result of training in special education. Administrators who had preservice training only had significantly higher attitudes than those in the preservice and inservice groups. The number of special education courses taken did not affect attitudes toward mainstreaming. The results suggest that preservice training can affect administrator attitudes toward the special education practice of mainstreaming. This variable of attitude may or may not be influential in variations in levels of knowledge. If an administrator finds the law governing special education to be cumbersome and unreasonable, will that administrator be likely to develop their law knowledge? The influence of attitudes toward special needs children and the degree of commitment to protect their rights is an area for further investigation.

Experience. Another area for further investigation is the effect of experience with educating students with disabilities on the level of knowledge. The present study did not find years of experience to be significantly influential. How can a school administrator not demonstrate higher levels of knowledge of the law as they spend more time applying it? What happens as they spend more time as leaders in schools? Do they tend to move into positions where they have assistants to whom they can delegate special education? Do they rely more on others who are special education resources as time goes on? As school administrators spend more time as in schools, do they tend to set a higher priority on other management and instructional issues? What influences the school administrators to focus on non-special education issues?

Management focus. The management focus of school administrators may be an additional avenue for study. Do some administrators focus on doing things right, while

others focus on doing the right things for students? If so, does one focus influence more law knowledge than the other? Do school administrators who place a high priority on doing things right have a higher level of knowledge of special education law? If they place an emphasis on knowing the rules and regulations so that they can follow them, will they have more knowledge of this law than their colleagues? What about the school administrators who value doing the right thing for students? Are they so confident in their intention to be student centered that they believe they will automatically protect the rights of all students? Do they believe that they can do this without specific knowledge of the law which applies to students with disabilities? They may rely on their student focus rather than their law knowledge. There was a time when the education of students with disabilities was left to the discretion of the individual principal. Now, however, the law which governs the education of these students is complex and highly procedural. Can an administrator who relies on their ability to do the right things for students protect the rights of students with disabilities when doing so may appear unfair to their non-disabled peers? The administrator may be confident that a student focus will always result in the protection of student rights. Does management focus have any influence on the variation in levels of law knowledge?

Level of knowledge. The mean knowledge score in this study was 18 or 56% correct. A question for additional study is whether or not a score of 56% correct is sufficient for a school administrator to protect the rights of disabled students. Is it possible for an administrator with this score to avoid repeated meetings with parents, advocates and attorneys while building positive community relations and avoiding unnecessary costs? Does this score indicate that the average school administrator is in compliance with their decisions approximately every other time? And if a score of 56% correct is not sufficient, what score is sufficient? Is there a significant difference between school administrators' knowledge in districts with high numbers of litigation cases compared with those in districts with low litigation case numbers?

Effect of survey items. Is there a significant difference between school administrator knowledge of the law which governs the education of students with disabilities and their application of that knowledge? Could school administrators be better prepared to respond to scenarios which are similar to what they face in the daily operation of their schools than they are to respond to knowledge items? It may be useful to construct a special education law survey which consists of scenarios taken from case law with several possible responses. The scenarios would represent the domains of free appropriate public education, individual education programs, least restrictive environment, appropriate evaluations, procedural safeguards, and parent, student participation. The school administrator could be instructed to select the one best answer, i.e., the answer describes the action which is on the firmest legal ground.

Timing of the survey. The timing of this study resulted in respondents receiving a survey to complete only months after new amendments to IDEA were enacted. Approximately 30% of the items were based upon sections of the 1997 Amendments. The knowledge of respondents may be higher once the federal and state regulations are available. Will school administrators' knowledge of special education law change when they have received the federal and state regulations which are based upon the law? If the same survey were to be administered at a future date, would the results be the same?

Types of knowledge. Another direction for further research would be to determine whether there is a significant difference between the types of knowledge which school administrators have. Is there a difference between school principals' knowledge of specific case law, knowledge of underlying concepts of legislation and case law, and knowledge of regulations and policy? It remains unknown as to whether one type of knowledge is any more useful in application to daily operations of schools. Although the items on the survey used in this study represented different types of knowledge, no attempt was made to analyze them in this way. If a school administrator has an understanding of the concepts upon which special education law is based, does he or she administer special education in



their school more effectively than one who only knows state and district procedures/regulations?

Adult learning and administrator preferences. It is also important to find out how school administrators prefer to receive their training in special education law. With the raising of standards, principals have many concerns other than special education. It is important for principals to receive periodic updates in a manner which they can manage and use. It may be useful to study the types of resources administrators use to get their knowledge of special education as well as the types of resources which they would prefer to have in place. Recommendations can then be made to the state department and to local education agencies. What avenues for training are more effective than attending inservice sessions? It is important to consider information on adult learning. While inservice sessions may still be useful in some situations, the traditional one session training has not been supported in the literature. Other approaches have been found to be more effective for developing deeper understandings (Educational Research Service, 1998). Mentorships, portfolio development, peer coaching, study groups, action research, and school improvement professional development are strategies which have been found to contribute to a comprehensive program for professional growth. Using effective approaches to adult learning, local districts can plan meaningful training for school administrators in the law that governs students with disabilities rather than leaving it to chance. Application of adult learning to strategies to the development of principal knowledge of special education law is another direction for further study.

Comparing Virginia administrators with other states. How do Virginia administrators in schools compare administrators from other states on the same measure of special education law? A national survey of school administrators could reveal variations in knowledge which could lead to an investigation of the factors which influence their knowledge.

### School Districts

What is the number of state complaints, requests for due process hearings, and federal court cases from a school which can be tolerated by a school district? At what point would a school board take action with the school administrator for failing to operate within the law? Also, what is the role of special education law update training? Do school districts provide for these updates? Do principals who choose to attend these on a regular basis have a higher level of knowledge than those who do not?

Systems for staff development. Do local school district have comprehensive systems for staff development in the area of special education law? Since the law has been recently amended, were systems in place to update administrators or did the local district have to start to develop a plan for this situation? With ongoing litigation and periodic congressional reviews, one step that school districts can take is to have a staff development system in place to use at regular intervals. What assistance do school districts need to develop these human resources systems? School boards may be more supportive of this initiative if they understanding the current levels of knowledge and the need to provide avenues for improving those levels.

Expectations. It may also be valuable to determine what role school districts expect school administrators to play with regard to special education. If they are expected to protect the rights of students with disabilities and comply with special education law, is that expectation clear to administrators? When a parent has a difference of opinion with school personnel and requests a meeting where they will bring an advocate, do school administrators feel that the expectation is for them to resolve the situation or know the law and apply it? Does a lack of knowledge of the law protecting students with disabilities have an effect on the outcomes in these cases? Is it clear whether compliance with special education law a responsibility of the school administrator, the special education administrator, or is it shared? What level of knowledge is necessary for school administrators? What level of competency is required?

The results of this study lead to more questions and inquiries into levels of special education law knowledge, expectations of school administrators regarding this law, and systems for pre-training as well as inservice training to develop and maintain high knowledge levels. The role of attitudes toward students with disabilities was not addressed. For school administrators in Virginia, the completion of special education course work has been found to be significant in explaining higher levels of special education law knowledge.

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## Appendix A: Special Education Law Survey

Background Information Directions: Please respond to each question by indicating...

1. your total years of experience as a building level administrator: \_\_\_\_\_
2. your school population: 200-599\_\_\_\_ 600-1000\_\_\_\_ 1001-2000\_\_\_\_ 2000+ \_\_\_\_\_
3. your current position: Principal \_\_\_\_ Assistant Principal \_\_\_\_
4. the total number of special education courses you have completed:  
as an undergraduate \_\_\_\_\_ as a graduate student \_\_\_\_\_
5. the total number of school law courses you have completed: \_\_\_\_\_ .
6. Please circle the grades in your school:  
K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 ungraded

Directions: Please do not guess but circle the one best answer.

1. Least restrictive environment refers to...
  - (a) mainstreaming all students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.
  - (b) educating students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.
  - (c) integrating all students with disabilities into regular education classes.
  - (d) I do not know.
  
2. A district's compliance with LRE regulations written for IDEA would best be demonstrated by providing...
  - (a) center schools for students with severe disabilities.
  - (b) cross categorical programs.
  - (c) a continuum of alternative placements.
  - (d) I do not know.
  
3. In order to qualify for federal support under the IDEA a state must have a policy that assures all students with disabilities...
  - (a) an individualized education program.
  - (b) evaluation by a multi-disciplinary team.
  - (c) a free appropriate education.
  - (d) I do not know.
  
4. The Supreme Court's decision in Board of Education v. Rowley is applied by school districts when...
  - (a) a basic floor of opportunity is granted to all students with disabilities.
  - (b) the potential of every student with disabilities is maximized.
  - (c) an individual education program is developed for all students.
  - (d) I do not know.

5. Non-discriminatory assessment, which occurs only with parental consent, must meet these two conditions...
- (a) tests are given in the student's native language and accommodations for the student's disability are made.
  - (b) multiple procedures are used for placement decisions and testing procedures are validated for intended purpose.
  - (c) all assessment instruments are administered by a school psychologist and are normed against local populations.
  - (d) I do not know.
6. When a special education student is being re-evaluated for continued placement \_\_\_\_\_ is necessary.
- (a) informed consent.
  - (b) written informed consent.
  - (c) written notice.
  - (d) I do not know.
7. The Supreme Court's decision in *Honig v. Doe*, which brought the issues of suspension and expulsion before the Court, clarified that...
- (a) current educational placements must be continued while being reviewed.
  - (b) suspensions of more than 10 days are never allowed for students with disabilities.
  - (c) behavior which is a manifestation of a student's disability may not be disciplined.
  - (d) I do not know.
8. Following a re-evaluation the multi-disciplinary team determines that a student currently placed in a specific learning disabilities program would be more appropriately placed in a program for students with behavioral disorders. The parent does not agree to the placement and requests an impartial due process hearing. While awaiting a decision, the student receives special education services in the...
- (a) specific learning disabilities program.
  - (b) behavior disorders program.
  - (c) regular education program.
  - (d) I do not know.
9. Following identification, testing, and evaluation to determine need for special education services, an Individual Education Program (IEP) is developed. This plan must include all but the following...
- (a) a statement which indicates the student's present level of educational performance.
  - (b) the criteria and procedures for determining whether short-term objectives have been met.
  - (c) the date of the student's next scheduled multi-disciplinary team re-evaluation.
  - (d) I do not know.



10. At the meeting for developing the IEP, the representatives of the school must give parents...
- (a) a copy of the IEP.
  - (b) an opportunity to suggest changes.
  - (c) a place to sign for consent.
  - (d) I do not know.
11. In *Irving v. Tatro*, the issue brought before the court concerned health services. The specific service at issue was catheterization. In determining whether this was a medical service not required under the Education of All Handicapped Children Act or a related health service, the Court established this three part test...
- (a) does the student receive any benefit from special education, are the services necessary to maintain necessary bodily functions, and can the service be paid for or provided by the parent.
  - (b) does the student qualify for special education, are the services necessary for the student to benefit from special education, and can the services be provided by a nurse or other qualified person.
  - (c) does the student have a disability that requires special education services, are the services of a medical nature, and can the school district maintain qualified personnel to provide the services.
  - (d) I do not know.
12. If a particular medication or treatment, considered to be a related service for a special education student, must also be administered to a child during non-school hours the school is...
- (a) obligated to provide the service during those times.
  - (b) not required to provide nursing services to administer it.
  - (c) obligated only if the services can be provided by a layperson.
  - (d) I do not know.
13. Under the fourteenth amendment of the United States Constitution, states may not deprive citizens of equal protection of the laws. Other than the fact that constitutionally based challenges are cumbersome and complex to litigate most special education cases are not brought alleging constitutional violation because...
- (a) education is a substantive right.
  - (b) education is provided for under the state constitution.
  - (c) the IDEA provides a basic avenue for redress.
  - (d) I do not know.
14. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act require that no otherwise qualified person be excluded on the basis of disability from participation in any public program or activity. Otherwise qualified refers to an individual who, in spite of a disability, can meet the program or activity's...
- (a) non-essential requirements.
  - (b) essential requirements.
  - (c) essential and non-essential requirements.
  - (d) I do not know.

15. Fundamental changes in a school's educational program to accommodate an individual with a disability are...
- (a) required by Section 504.
  - (b) not required by Section 504.
  - (c) required when they are of low cost by Section 504.
  - (d) I do not know.
16. Schools must make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, who are not eligible for services under IDEA but qualify under the expanded definition of disability in Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, to participate in...
- (a) special education programs.
  - (b) the regular education program.
  - (c) vocational education.
  - (d) I do not know.
17. Under Section 504, a student with attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder that does not qualify for placement in special education programs for students with specific learning disabilities or other health impairments requires...
- (a) appropriate accommodation in regular education programs.
  - (b) appropriate education in special education programs.
  - (c) medical diagnosis to receive special education services.
  - (d) I do not know.
18. Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act require...
- (a) non-discriminatory hiring practices.
  - (b) affirmative action programs to assure non-discrimination.
  - (c) active recruitment of persons with disabilities.
  - (d) I do not know.
19. When schools select applicants (from a pool of qualified individuals with or without disabilities) for instructional and non-instructional positions, they must hire the individual...
- (a) who can most effectively execute all essential and non-essential job functions.
  - (b) whose skills for executing essential job functions are superior.
  - (c) who has the best interpersonal and communication skills.
  - (d) I do not know.
20. Schools are not required to provide \_\_\_\_\_ for students who are assessed but do not qualify for special education services under IDEA.
- (a) related services
  - (b) notice of rejection decision
  - (c) educational programs
  - (d) I do not know.

21. The IDEA recognizes the need to plan for and provide transition services so that all students with disabilities will be prepared to enter integrated employment, post-secondary education, vocational training, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation, beginning no later than...
- (a) the implementation date of September 1, 1995.
  - (b) 14 years of age.
  - (c) the junior year of a student's high school program.
  - (d) I do not know.
22. The IEP for a student with a disability must indicate...
- (a) how the disability affects the child's involvement in the regular curriculum.
  - (b) individual modifications for state or district assessments.
  - (c) a and b.
  - (d) I do not know.
23. Each student's IEP must be reviewed...
- (a) to determine whether goals are achieved.
  - (b) every six months.
  - (c) a and b.
  - (d) I do not know.
24. A student who has engaged in behavior that violates a rule of the district (LEA) and who has not been determined to be eligible for special education...
- (a) is not protected by IDEA.
  - (b) may be protected by IDEA.
  - (c) is not protected by IDEA or Section 504.
  - (d) I do not know.
25. When a student with a disability reaches the age of majority under state law...
- (a) the school informs the student of his rights.
  - (b) only a magistrate can transfer rights to the student.
  - (c) IDEA protections are terminated.
  - (d) I do not know.
26. A copy of procedural safeguards available to parents of a child with a disability must be given...
- (a) upon initial referral for evaluation.
  - (b) upon each notification of an IEP meeting.
  - (c) a and b.
  - (d) I do not know.

27. In the mediation process...
- (a) the local school district maintains a list of qualified mediators.
  - (b) the child's parents must obtain the mediator.
  - (c) the state maintains a list of qualified mediators.
  - (d) I do not know.
28. The term seriously emotionally disturbed has been changed to...
- (a) emotionally disturbed.
  - (b) behaviorally handicapped.
  - (c) emotionally challenged.
  - (d) I do not know.
29. When preparing to conduct a triennial evaluation...
- (a) the parents must be given written notice.
  - (b) informed parental consent is necessary.
  - (c) parents must be given notice of results.
  - (d) I do not know.
30. Determination of whether a child has a disability is made by...
- (a) a team of certified educators.
  - (b) the child's parent.
  - (c) a and b.
  - (d) I do not know.
31. The IEP team will include...
- (a) the student's guidance counselor.
  - (b) at least one regular education teacher.
  - (c) the school principal.
  - (d) I do not know.
32. If a student's misconduct is determined to be unrelated to his disability, the school...
- (a) can cease special education services.
  - (b) cannot cease special education services.
  - (c) provides a 40 day alternative placement.
  - (d) I do not know.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION.  
I APPRECIATE THE TIME THAT YOU HAVE COMMITTED.

## Appendix B: Correspondence To School Administrators

### Cover Letter to Accompany Survey

February 9, 1998

Dear Principal (Assistant Principal),

Attached please find your copy of the survey on special education law. This study is important because of the increasing responsibility placed on building administrators to protect the rights of students with disabilities and to avoid costly litigation. **Your participation is very significant and will have an impact on the results of this study.**

All individual results will be completely confidential. An identification number on your survey will be used to check off your name on the mailing list when it is returned. Only group results will be reported.

As a student who cannot complete this study without this information, I respectfully request your assistance. I know that you can appreciate the task that I am facing and will respond by January 19th. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and return it in the enclosed stamped envelope. Should you wish to receive a summary of the results of this study, please indicate this below.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Respectfully,

Harolyn J. Katherman  
Doctoral Candidate

Diane Gillespie  
Associate Professor  
Special Education Administration

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Yes, I would like to have a research summary.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Second Letter

February 27, 1998

Dear Principal (Assistant Principal),

I have not received your completed survey on special education law. I know that this is a thankless task in the midst of your busy schedule, but your input is important. Please take a few minutes to respond. I have enclosed another copy of the survey and another stamped envelope for your convenience. Your professional participation is important to the completion of my study. In order for me to complete my degree requirements, I must improve my response rate.

I will truly appreciate your participation.

Respectfully,

Harolyn J. Katherman  
Doctoral Candidate

## VITA

Harolyn J. Katherman attended public schools in Norfolk, Virginia and graduated in 1966. She attended Old Dominion University and graduated in 1971 with a B.S. degree in Education. She began her career as a psychoeducational specialist for Norfolk Public Schools that same year and began working as a Child Development Specialist in 1975. In both of these positions, she identified learning problems and consulted with teachers on plans to help all students meet success in regular classrooms. Graduate study was completed at Old Dominion University and, in 1976, she earned the degree of M.S. in Education. She continued to work for Norfolk schools as a teacher of students with learning disabilities from 1979 to 1984 and as an Educational Diagnostician from 1984 to 1988.

From 1988 until 1998, she was employed as the special education coordinator for programs for students with learning disabilities. In these programs approximately 1800 students served by 144 teachers of students with learning disabilities. During this time, she successfully worked with teachers to develop and implement a co-teaching service delivery model in every middle and high school within the Norfolk district. She was responsible for providing training for regular teachers as well as special education teachers. In 1998, she became responsible for all special education services and programs in Cluster III in the Norfolk district as a Senior Coordinator.