

Virginia Principals' Characteristics in Virginia School Divisions with High or No Incidences of
Special Education Complaints

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Abstract

School administrators are responsible for ensuring state and federal special education laws and regulations are being implemented properly. This study examined the amount of training a Virginia school principal receives while attending principal preparation programs as well as professional development offered by their school division on how to handle any legal issues that may arise pertaining to special education. In 1975 Congress enacted the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142) and amended in 1997 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Education for All Handicapped Children Act was introduced in Congress to ensure that students with disabilities were provided the same opportunities as general education students. This legislation was later renamed IDEIA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, in 2004.

A web-based survey was used to obtain information from principals in school divisions with high or no incidences of special education complaints. The survey was sent to 12 school divisions with 189 schools and 21 divisions with 189 schools respectively. The data collected from participants was analyzed with JMP software to determine patterns in principal responses based on their employment in divisions with high or no incidences of special education complaints. Statistical analysis included measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode), frequencies, and percentages of the data collected at the state and regional level, by high or no incidence groups to determine if better prepared, more experienced, more informed principals that have had on-going training are able to administer special education programs effectively and therefore have fewer parent complaints.

The results of the study indicated a need for higher education institutions (colleges and universities) to increase course offerings at the principal preparation level in the area of special education. Additionally there is a need for superintendents and division leadership to continue to develop and seek partnerships to deliver relevant ongoing professional development, as well as for principals to explore special education networking opportunities external to the division.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Context

In 1975 Congress enacted the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142) and amended in 1997 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Education for All Handicapped Children Act was introduced in Congress to ensure that students with disabilities were provided the same opportunities as general education students (ed.gov, 2007). This legislation led schools to change the way special education students are educated in public schools. IDEA was developed as a civil rights law designed to provide equal protection for students with disabilities. Included in the law are accountability standards based on student performance. IDEA provides funds and specific rights to students and parents of special needs students, while regulating how school divisions can spend funds designated for special education. This critical piece of legislation was reauthorized in 1997, at which time it was renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (ed.gov, 2007). Administrators are held accountable for student outcomes based on the school division's ability to provide an educational environment that follows the rules and regulations set by IDEIA (Turnbull, 2005). The accountability system within IDEIA also provides students and parents the right to participate in placement decisions (National Dissemination Center for Children, 2010).

The main mechanism through which students and parents participate in decision-making is through the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). IEPs are developed in teams that include parents, regular education teachers, special education teachers, individuals providing related services, an administrator, and student when appropriate. “There are parts of the IEP that can be more problematic than others, and if they are not understood or not taken seriously, they can create problems - including lawsuits - for a school or district” (Armenta & Beckers, 2006, p. 22). IEPs are legal documents that drive the services being provided and are integral in meeting the needs of the students. With increasing numbers in the special education population, a principal without a clear understanding of special education rules and regulations will have difficulty meeting the requirements set for educational accountability (Rascoe, 2007). Powers (2007) noted an increase in advocacy groups supporting

students with disabilities and parents, which has led to an increase in litigation against school divisions.

“The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) increased the principal's instructional leadership responsibilities by ensuring that students with disabilities received individualized academic and/ or social instruction in the least restrictive environment”(Lynch, 2012, p 40). Principals need to understand the ramifications if they do not understand the laws of special education and cannot implement the related rules and regulations (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Principals are challenged with not only facing challenges caused by comprehensive school reform, but now they are asked to provide appropriate access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Principals were once viewed as managers for staff and disciplinarians for students, but over time, the role of principal has evolved to include instructional leadership (nea.org, 2008). “Instructional leaders promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (Cooner, Tochtermann, Garrison-Wade, 2005, p. 2). This duty includes educating all students, including students with disabilities. “Research has demonstrated that principals who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high-quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities and for others at risk for school failure”(DiPaola & Walter-Thomas, 2003, p. 9).

Principals are required to go through educational programs to become certified to fulfill their role as the educational leader for all students, yet the number of programs with a special education law concentration is minimal (Witt, 2003). Although the responsibility of the principal has increased, almost no state requires any training in special education for an individual to become licensed as a principal (Bateman & Bateman, 2001). Based on a review of the websites of the 17 university principal preparation programs approved by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), none offered students a course dedicated to special education law in the administrator preparation program. The researcher examined the titles of required courses in principal preparation programs approved by the VDOE and none of them contained both "special education" and "law." Additionally, one course by itself may not be enough, but since programs in Virginia do not offer coursework dedicated to special education law, graduates

will have to rely on professional development opportunities provided by their local divisions. According to Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, “unfortunately, research has also demonstrated that many principals are receiving little to no formal preservice or inservice training” (2006, p. 154). Given the high stakes nature of special education, preparation, training, and professional development in the area of special education should remain a high priority. Principals involved in the supervision and provision of special education services need more than a superficial understanding of the law in order to comply with the federal regulations of IDEA (Power, 2007).

Purpose and Overview of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education. The researcher investigated if principal knowledge of special education laws and regulations has an effect on the rate of complaints filed against Virginia school divisions.

Through quantitative methodology, the researcher looked for patterns in complaints filed against school divisions in Virginia and sought the perspective of principals in low and high incidence school divisions through surveys. The study included investigating college and university administration programs and special education law or administration components of the programs, years of experience of the principal, as well as survey responses of principals gauging knowledge level of administrators in the area of special education. Additionally, principals were asked to rate their perception of their special education knowledge to determine if there is a relationship between perceived knowledge and number of complaints filed by parents in the area of special education.

Statement of the Problem

Principals have the responsibility of instructional leader for all students (nea.org, 2008), yet many principal preparation programs do not include coursework in special education law. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, none of the 17 approved colleges and universities with principal preparation programs has a dedicated course in the area of special education law (VDOE, 2012).

Sixteen programs offer school law courses, which may briefly discuss special education law, but this may not be adequate in the preparation of school leaders (Witt, 2003). If principals are not adequately prepared to lead special education duties and fail to implement IDEIA-compliant instructional programming, school divisions are at risk of costly litigation by disgruntled parents (Armenta & Beckers, 2006).

Significance of the study

Parents and guardians filing complaints against school divisions may indicate potential problems in administrators' knowledge in the area of special education law. It is critical to assess gaps in principals' knowledge base to target interventions, through relevant professional development, in order to serve the needs of the special education population in a manner consistent with IDEIA. Additionally, colleges and universities might take an interest in this study, as findings may indicate a need to reevaluate their principal preparation programs to include coursework in the area of special education law or administration.

Justification of the Study

Having conducted a thorough review of the literature, there is presently very little research on the perception of principals in Virginia regarding their preparedness for administering special education programs. The lack of research, coupled with the absence of required coursework in special education law and the increase in filed complaints three out of four years ranging from 2009-2012 (VDOE, 2012), makes this study a valuable contribution to the field and the literature. The findings from this study could serve as a baseline measure of principal preparation for special education-related issues as well as a source of data to consider in targeting professional development in Virginia school divisions.

Research Questions

This study sought the answers to the following research questions:

1. What patterns emerge in principals' professional contexts in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints regarding special education?

2. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of their special education knowledge in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints regarding special education?
3. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of relevant professional development offered in the area of special education in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints regarding special education?
4. What patterns emerge in coursework in college or university principal preparation programs in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints regarding special education?
5. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of factors contributing to parent complaints in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints regarding special education?

Conceptual Framework

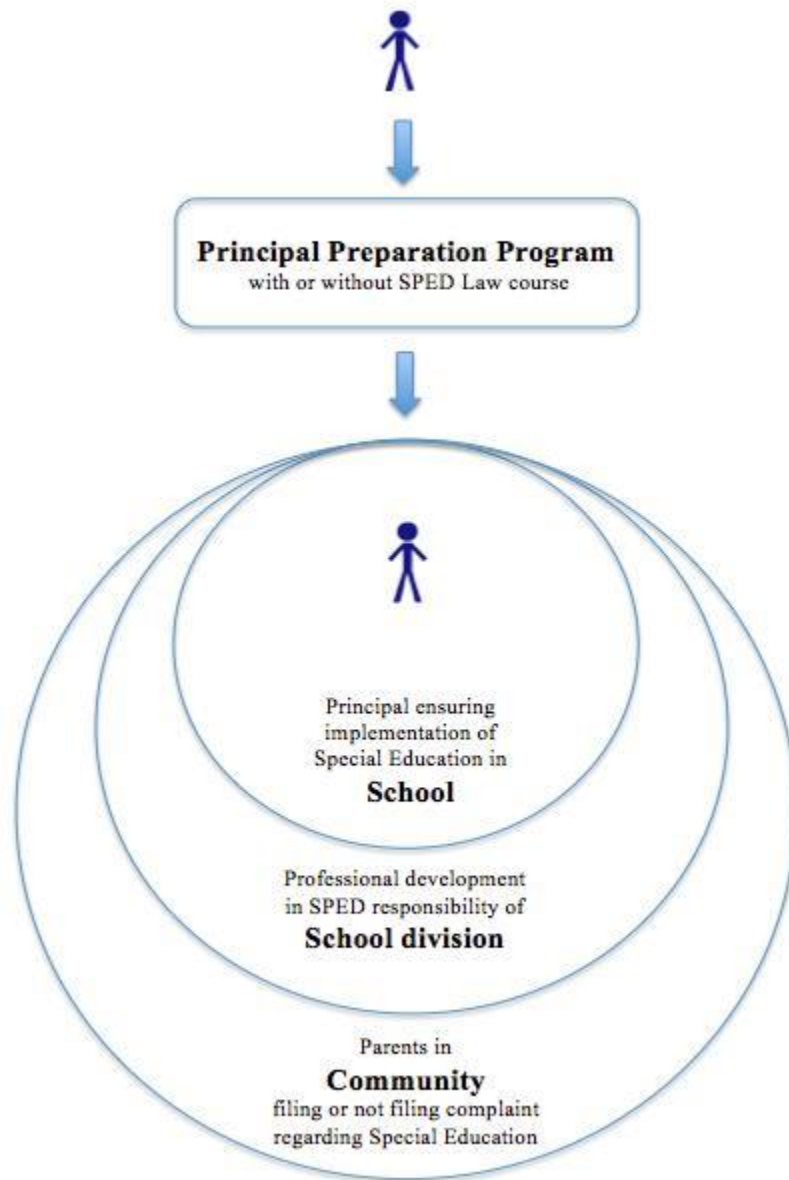


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of study. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study.

Principals enter into college and university preparation programs seeking knowledge and skills to become successful building administrators. Principals are charged with the responsibility of implementing the mandates of IDEIA. College and university programs in the Commonwealth of Virginia do not offer dedicated coursework in the area of special education law. The lack of special education law courses being offered produce principals that are lacking in the area of

special education law (Witt, 2003). Research indicates pre-service preparation of principals may be inadequate (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006).

Graduates of approved programs are hired as principals in Virginia public schools to serve as the instructional leaders in the building. Principals are tasked with the duty of providing a learning environment conducive to learning for all students while implementing the mandates of IDEIA. When principals are not successful in fulfilling this duty, complaints are often filed against the school division for noncompliance of IDEIA.

School divisions should shoulder the responsibility for providing timely, relevant training in the area of special education law to their administrators. Research indicates inadequacy in the professional development principals receive in this area (Price & Wells, 2013; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). The lack of professional development impacts the ability of principals to implement IDEIA mandates.

Principals' lack of knowledge related to implementing IDEIA is the result of inadequate pre-service preparation and in-service professional development. Principal preparation programs, however, failed to prepare graduates for the role of the instructional leader, especially regarding students with disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006). This gap in preparedness may result in increased frequencies of complaints by parents of children being served by the school. This lack of preparedness in the area of Special Education is documented in research (Angelle & Bilton, 2009), and DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran (2003) state the greatest need expressed by principals was help and information about implementing successful special education programs (as cited in Angelle & Bilton, 2009, p. 6)."

Definitions

The following terms were used throughout this study, and definitions are provided to facilitate clarity of understanding:

- Complaint: "generally an expression of some disagreement with a procedure or a process regarding special education programs, procedures or services. A formal complaint is considered a request that the division investigate an alleged violation of a right of a parent and/or child with disabilities who is eligible, or believed to be eligible, for certain services based on federal and state laws and regulations governing special education." (VDOE, 2010, p. 2)

- Due Process: provides parents with the opportunity to file a complaint against the school division for failure to implement IDEA mandates. Due process will allow an impartial individual at the state level the opportunity to rule on the complaint and provide possible solutions to the problem. Due process complaints can be filed by either the parent or the school division. The complaint must include a recommended solution to the issue. Due process complaints have to be filed within two years of the alleged incident unless it can be proven that the local agency misled the parent to believe they have resolved the issue (Wright & Wright 2005).
- Due Process Hearing: “an administrative procedure conducted by an impartial special education hearing officer to resolve disagreements regarding the identification, evaluation, educational placement and services, and the provision of a free appropriate public education that arise between a parent(s) and a local educational agency. A due process hearing involves the appointment of an impartial special education hearing officer who conducts the hearing, reviews evidence, and determines what is educationally appropriate for the child with a disability.” (34 CFR300 .507) (VDOE, 2010, p. 4)
- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): provides students with disabilities the opportunity to receive all of the benefits of a public school education, while being educated with an individualized plan that will meet the needs of the disability. It is the school division’s responsibility to not just meet the educational needs of the students, but also meet their functional needs. The student’s education must be provided at no cost to the student and provide the family with due process (Wright & Wright 2005).
- Individualized Education Program (IEP): a student’s annual plan that is written, reviewed, and revised during IEP meetings that discuss present level of performance, academically and functionally, discuss how the disability affects the students’ performance, specialized instruction, related services, participation in state testing, transportation, least restrictive environment, and what accommodations are needed to assist the student to overcome the obstacle of the disability (Wright & Wright 2005). The IEP also will include information pertaining to annual goals, transition goals, and how student progress will be measured. Information collected for evaluations,

observations, IEP team member input, and student interviews are used in the development of the IEP. IEP's are developed for all students who are eligible for educational supports and specialized services (Barton, 2013).

- JMP Statistical Software: JMP computer software is used to create statistical data analysis
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): provides students with disabilities the opportunity to spend the maximum amount of time being educated with students without disabilities. Students with disabilities will only be separated from their peers when they cannot successfully complete the requirements of the course with supplemental aids and services. The needs of the students will take precedence over the opinions or what the school feels is in their best interest, and the school must provide resources for the student even if it will cause the school to provide an additional service not previously used. Every attempt has to be made to allow the student every opportunity to be educated with peers without disabilities (Wright & Wright 2005).
- Local Educational Agency (LEA): “a school division governed by a local school board, a state-operated program that is funded and administered by the Commonwealth of Virginia” (VDOE, 2010 p. 7)
- Manifestation Determination Review: “a process to review all relevant information and the relationship between the child’s disability and the behavior subject to the disciplinary action” (VDOE, 2010, p.7)
- Principal: “The principal is recognized as the instructional leader of the school and is responsible for effective school management that promotes positive student achievement, a safe and secure environment in which to teach and learn, and efficient use of resources (Virginia Law, 2013).” In this study the principal will be defined as the highest ranking administrator at the building level (nea.org, 2008).
- Related services provide the student with disability: transportation, speech services, physical and occupational therapy, as well as other supportive services that will assist

the student to be successful. Related services will also benefit the parent by providing counseling and training to assist their child at home (Wright & Wright 2005).

Limitations/Delimitations

The researcher acknowledges limitations and delimitations of the study. Limitations include the following:

- The researcher's ability to communicate directly with a correct point of contact, as emails may be filtered or returned as undeliverable.
- Respondent's school may have experienced a change in leadership since the time of the complaint documented in the 2011-2012 VDOE study.
- The researcher is depending on principals' willingness to participate, accuracy in their perceived knowledge, and honesty of their answers.
- The understanding that a filed complaint differs from a founded complaint, however the presence of complaints indicates heightened scrutiny of administrative action by parents and their advocates, thus the validity of claims is immaterial to the methodology.
- School divisions' potential unwillingness to grant permission for principal participation, thus affecting representative sampling.
- An uneven number of school divisions within each Superintendent's region may have high or no incidences of complaints; thus, impacting sampling. In addition to their location, these divisions may disproportionately represent other aspects such as urbanicity (rural, suburban, urban communities).
- Virginia Department of Education reporting occurs at the division level and not the school level. Therefore it is possible that a principal will respond from a division with a complaint but from a school that did not have a complaint.

- Relevant professional development in the area of special education law issues are the responsibility of the school division to provide, principal knowledge in the area of special education law as a result of the professional development may be uniform.

Delimitations include the following:

- The inclusion of principals working in public schools in Virginia in a school division with high or no incidences of formal parent complaints filed with the VDOE in the 2011-2012 school year.
- The requested survey respondent was the principal as instructional leader of the school. While some principals delegate special education administration to others, it is assumed that the principals, as instructional leaders responsible for instructional programming, will ultimately be reasonably knowledgeable about special education in their building, as well as an awareness of what they need.

Organization of the Study

This first chapter addresses the principal as the responsible party for implementing the instructional program and ensuring compliance to regulations governing special education. Additionally, Chapter 1 included background of the problem, a theoretical framework, a justification of the study, guiding research questions for investigation, and key terms. Chapter 2 includes a review of scholarly literature and case law relevant to the principalship and special education, including justification for the study. The methodological approach and procedures related to data collection, management, and analysis are defined in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of the research questions, results of the study, and data analysis. Chapter 5 includes the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

With the re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), combined with the ever-changing laws of special education, has made the position of current administrators very difficult (O'Dell and Schaefer, 2005). An increase in advocacy groups supporting students with disabilities and parents was indicated, and this has led to an increase in litigation against school divisions (Power, 2007). Administrators are required to go through educational programs to become certified to fulfill their roles, but when you look at the programs being offered, the number of programs with a special education law concentration is minimal (Witt, 2003). Administrators rely on professional development opportunities provided by their local divisions or conferences. Administrators are responsible for ensuring IEP's are being implemented properly. Even with the increasing responsibilities placed on administrators due to the implementation of new accountability regulations, special education training and issues should remain at the top of the list. According to Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison Wade (2005) "The leadership role of principals is crucial for improved education for students with disabilities, yet in recent years states have moved away from mandating preparation programs to include coursework on special education policy, procedures, laws, and practice" (page 1).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education.

The Research Process

The research process started with a review of literature in the area of school administrators' knowledge of special education law. This process was conducted using Virginia Tech's online library, EBSCO host database, and Google Scholar search engine. While conducting the search using these three sites, the focus was on locating studies and dissertations from 2000 to 2013. To narrow the search to relevant literature, key terms included: principal knowledge of special education law, preparation programs designed to assist administrators to be

successful leaders in the area of special education, and school division litigation as a result of special education violations.

Results from the process of searching for literature resulted in hundreds of dissertations and studies. The results were narrowed to 28 studies and 10 dissertations. The 38 pieces of literature were chosen because they concentrated in the area of principal knowledge, preparation programs, implementation of IDEIA, or litigation. The search resulted in the location and use of 14 articles in the area of knowledge, nine in the area of implementation of IDEIA, eight in the area of preparation programs, and seven in the area of litigation against school divisions.

Key Developments in Special Education Case Law

Congress was forced into taking action to provide equal opportunity to an appropriate education after several court cases in the United States. *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case in 1954 and 1955 established the right for equal opportunity to an education (*Brown v. Board of Education, 1954*). The *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* case of 1971 ruled that students with mental retardation must be educated and provided the same opportunities as students without a disability (*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1971*). The *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* ruling explained that any student with a disability must be afforded the same opportunities as regular education students, and that a hearing and review of the student's progress will take place to ensure all of their needs are being met (*Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia, 1972*). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability. During the time period of 1960-1975, 45 states passed laws or encouraged mandates to fund special education programs (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Amy Rowley* in 1982 provided a definition of free appropriate public education (FAPE), and similar cases have since clarified other mandates in IDEIA for educators (*Board of Education Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley, 1982*). These cases were the driving force to the creation of legislation of special education laws (Wright,P 2010).

Key components of IDEIA

Special education laws have expanded in the United States as a result of historical court cases and development of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, with reauthorizations that have resulted in a current version known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). IDEIA has been reauthorized several times since its creation, with the most recent reauthorization in 2004. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 was signed into law by President George W. Bush on December 3, 2004. The law reauthorized and made important changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Yell, Shrinier, & Katsiyannis, 2006). IDEIA has four parts and is a set of mandates used to ensure students with disabilities are provided a free appropriate public education. Part A of IDEIA defines key terms and the basic foundation of the law, Part B is dedicated to guidelines set to educate students with disabilities, Part C has a focus on early identification of students with disabilities, and Part D explains national activities to improve education for students with disabilities.

Free appropriate public education. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) provides students with disabilities the opportunity to receive all of the benefits of a public school education, while being educated with an individualized plan that will meet the needs of the of the student. It is the school division's responsibility to not just meet the educational needs of the students, but also meet their functional needs. The student's education must be provided at no cost to the student and provide the family with due process (Wright & Wright 2005).

Individualized education program. Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the student's annual plan that is written, reviewed, and revised during IEP meetings. IDEIA also equips parents with equal power in IEP team meetings where decisions are made about the education of their child. In addition to parents, other members of the IEP team include building administrator, special education teacher, regular education teacher, any staff providing related services, student, and case manager. The resulting IEP, created by this diverse team of stakeholders, includes present level of performance (academically and functionally), a description of how the disability affects the student's performance, specialized instruction required, the provision of related services, participation in state testing, transportation arrangements, least restrictive environment for placement, and accommodations necessary to assist the student in overcoming the obstacle of the disability (Wright & Wright 2005). The IEP

also includes information pertaining to annual goals, transition goals, and how student progress is to be measured. Data used in the development of the IEP includes results from evaluations and assessments, observations, IEP team member input, and student interviews. IEPs are developed for all students who are eligible for educational supports and specialized services (Barton, 2013).

Least restrictive environment. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provides students with disabilities the opportunity to spend the maximum amount of time being educated with students without disabilities. Students with disabilities are only to be separated from their peers when they cannot successfully complete the requirements of the course with supplemental aids and services. The needs of the student take precedence over what school administration feels is in the organization's best interest, as the school must provide resources for the student - even if it means creating additional services and programs. According to this principle of IDEIA, every attempt has to be made to allow the student every opportunity to be educated with peers without disabilities (Wright & Wright 2005).

Student discipline. IDEIA mandates for student discipline provides students with protection from being punished for actions that are related to their disability. Students with disabilities can be disciplined under the same process as students without disabilities until the tenth day of removal from their placement. At that point, a manifestation determination meeting must be held to determine if the behavior was related to the student's disability. If it is determined that the behavior was related to the disability, the student will not receive consequences for the incident in question and return to his or her previously determined placement. The IEP team conducts a meeting to determine if a Functional Behavior Assessment or Behavior Intervention Plan is needed to address the behavior. If it is determined that the behavior was a result of the LEA's failure to implement components of the IEP, the student is to be returned to his or her current placement. Incidents that are severe and create an unsafe environment for other students - such as possession of a weapon, illegal drugs, or inflicting serious injury to another student or staff - the school can remove the student from his or her current placement and place them in an alternative setting for no longer than 45 days (Wright & Wright, 2005).

Due process. Due Process provides parents with the opportunity to file a complaint against the school division for failure to implement IDEIA mandates. Due process allows an impartial individual at the state level the opportunity to rule on the complaint and provide

possible solutions to the problem. Due process complaints can be filed by either the parent or the school division. The complaint must include a recommended solution to the issue. Due process complaints have to be filed within two years of the alleged incident, unless it can be proven that the local agency misled the parent to believe that the issue had been adequately resolved (Wright & Wright 2005).

Related services. Related services provided to students with disabilities include transportation, speech services, physical and occupational therapy, as well as other supportive services that will assist the student to be successful. Related services also benefit the parent by providing counseling and training to assist their child at home (Wright & Wright 2005).

Impact of Federal Mandates on Instructional Programming

Curriculum and instruction. IDEIA mandates that instruction be researched based and effective for all students (IDEIA, 2004). IDEIA mandates combined with mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have raised the stakes for all of our students, including students with disabilities, as all students are assessed on their mastery of the same grade level curriculum. IDEIA also addresses the issue of mandating that every attempt is made to provide instruction at grade level, unless the student's disability does not allow them to function at this level (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000).

Accommodations. In this new era, to ensure equal access to the curriculum, the use of accommodations is critical to providing instruction for students with disabilities. Accommodations to assist students with disabilities in accessing curriculum include providing extra time on assignments, having staff members read aloud to the student, varying the length of assignments, providing alternate assessments, and making copies of notes.

Assessment. Starting in 2006, the Virginia Department of Education altered the criteria and the number of alternative standardized testing options made available for students with disabilities (Mistretta, 2008). This has increased the number of students with disabilities taking the Standard of Learning (SOL) test, and leading to an increase in the number of students with disabilities being placed in inclusive settings.

Placement. IDEIA and NCLB mandates have together greatly impacted instructional programming for students with disabilities. Gone are the days of students with disabilities being secluded and being provided inferior instruction, as students with disabilities are now being

placed in inclusive classrooms with their peers, receiving instruction from the same teachers that are providing instruction to students without disabilities (Taylor, 2005).

Locus of responsibility. Under IDEIA, the school division ultimately bears the responsibility for ensuring IEP goal attainment within timelines specified in the document. The principal, as instructional leader of a school building, is ultimately responsible for implementing IEPs in his or her building with fidelity.

IDEIA Implementation Failures Resulting in Increased Advocacy and Litigation

Power (2007) reported an increasing number of special education advocacy agencies. These agencies are providing parents with support throughout the IEP development and implementation processes to ensure IDEIA compliance, and often encouraging them to file due process complaints against school divisions. Approximately 11,700 complaints have been filed with the Office of Civil Rights from the years of 2009-2011 for failure to implement the mandates of IDEIA (Price & Wells, 2013). Phillips (2008) study discussed barriers to parental advocacy, which arise from IDEIA's presumption that parents have a level of knowledge necessary in the area of special education to effectively represent their child. The three barriers include parents not understanding the criteria used to classify disabilities, knowledge of educational options, and procedural requirements mandated by IDEIA. Schools are the entity primarily responsible for developing student IEP's, while parents act as the student's representative in the face of school failure to implement the IEP (Phillips, 2008). Parents are enlisting the services of the large market of private advocates to assist in IEP meetings (2008). Special education advocates are defined as individuals with special education knowledge and advocacy skills to assist parents in working with school divisions (Burke, 2013). Disagreements between school systems and parents resulting in the request for due process hearings are the leading cause to the growing problem of special education litigation (Shuran and Roblyer, 2012).

Educational Leadership, Organizational Health, and the Culture of Instructional Leadership

Educational leaders are charged with the task of improving educational organizations, by providing clear directions to get members of the organization moving in the same direction (Leithwood, Day, Simmons, Harris, and Hopkins, 2006). Principals are the educational leaders of

schools and have to lead students, teachers, staff, parents, and the communities in which they serve. Strong leadership is essential for successful schools during this time of high standard accountability (Crawford-Brooke, 2015). Educational leaders must develop a clear mission and vision that focuses on student achievement. Leaders are responsible for motivating through providing incentives and professional development for all employees (Leithwood, Day, et.al, 2006).

Effective educational leaders have the ability to motivate and to develop leaders in the organization while keeping everyone focused on the mission of the organization. Principals have to balance the task of being visible in the school setting and obtaining buy-in from students and staff to making difficult decisions based on student data. “Effective school leaders develop organizational knowledge based, in large part, on their understanding of student data.” (Crawford-Brooke, 2015, p.1) Crawford-Brooke (2015) suggests principals should take an active role in data analysis not just the function of collecting data. The focus on data should be on-going while providing constant honest feedback to teachers and staff. An overlooked factor in effective educational leadership is creating a positive culture through positive beliefs and high expectations. This is not just high expectations for teachers and staff, but also setting high expectations for students. Educational leaders do not have all of the answers, but they must develop a culture of shared ownership of the organization (Crawford-Brooke, 2015).

According to Fink (2012), educational leadership focuses on the following five core beliefs, all of which directly relate to effectively administering special education:

1. Instructional leadership is learning-focused, learning for both students and adults, and learning which is measured by improvement in instruction and in the quality of student learning.
2. Instructional leadership must reside with a team of leaders of which the principal serves as the "leader of leaders."
3. A culture of public practice and reflective practice is essential for effective instructional leadership and the improvement of instructional practice.
4. Instructional leadership addresses the cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and learning diversity in the school community.

5. Instructional leadership focuses upon the effective management of resources and of people — recruiting, hiring, developing, evaluating — particularly in changing environments. (Fink, 2012, p.1)

Commonly Cited Complaints

Shuran and Roblyer's (2012) study investigated which areas of special education led to the highest incidents of complaints in the state of Tennessee. Among the findings, nearly 75% of complaints filed dealt with male secondary students; the types of disabilities were evenly distributed; Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) was cited in 78% of complaints against school divisions. Interviews conducted to complete the qualitative portion of the study indicated a lack of training and support led to the majority of problems facing school divisions, with poor relationships between parents and school officials as another important factor.

O'Dell and Schaefer (2005) investigated what areas of IDEIA are perceived to be most difficult to implement. Participants in the study included special education teachers, speech pathologists, and psychologists, and participants reported that appropriate placements were most difficult to implement. Teachers were frustrated with options presented by administrators to fulfill the needs of students and their placement in the educational setting while upholding the concept of Least Restrictive Environment. Participants also reported frustration with implementing the evaluation process to determine eligibility, due to dealing with doctors stating opinions from a medical standpoint and not considering the educational impact of the decision (O'Dell and Schaefer, 2005). Lastly, O'Dell and Schaefer reported teachers had a difficult time adjusting to different cultures and being forced to provide the minimum services for students. Ensuring that IEP goals are met was also a concern for participants of the study, but the IEP process as a whole was not an issue.

White's (2014) study analyzed data collected from the Department of Education in a Midwestern state based on complaint investigations. The most commonly cited complaint issue indicated in White's (2014) study pertained to IEP's. Three quarters of the respondents specified IEP related issues, with IEP content and implications as the major themes. White's (2014) study also indicated a breakdown in communication, as parents made allegations school personnel withheld information. Respondents of the study also discussed procedural violations such as school divisions changing student placement or conducting evaluations without parent consent.

Perceptions of Factors Leading to Parent Complaints

Lake's (2009) study was a follow-up of Lake and Billingsly's (2000) study which investigated factors that contribute to parent conflicts with schools in the area of special education. Lake identified the following eight factors that lead to parent-school special education conflict: differing views about a child or a child's needs, knowledge, service delivery, reciprocal power, constraints, valuation, communication, and trust. Overall, 90% of participants in Lake's (2009) study identified differing views as a factor causing conflict, with parent participants stating the school did not view their child as an individual or only focusing on the weaknesses of the child. Mediator participants indicated a lack of problem-solving skills among school officials and a lack of strategies for communication as a factor for conflicts. Communication and knowledge were factors described as preventable factors by participants of the study. Lake suggested that improving parents, teachers, and school officials knowledge in special education as the leading factor to decreasing parent/school conflicts.

Parent perceptions of interactions with school personnel was investigated and Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, and Crowley's (2005) study. Inadequate service delivery, difficulty obtaining services, and lack of collaboration were identified as parental concerns when interacting with school officials. Input from participants used in the study cited communication as an area of high importance for improving special education relations between parents and school. The goal of developing a partnership between parents and school is accomplished by effective communication, which will lead to eliminating a key factor leading to complaints (Stoner, et al, 2005).

Avoiding Complaints Through Best Practices for IDEIA Compliance

Avoiding complaints against school divisions in the area of special education consist of a team effort from central office administration, principals, and teachers. It is not necessary for principals to develop into disability experts, but they should have fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform special education task (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Central office administration support is critical to the development of successful special education programs (Shuran & Roblyer, 2012).

Scheffel, Rude, and Boyle's (2005) sought to investigate failures of compliance that led to due process hearings in school divisions for the purpose of gleaning practical lessons learned.

Data sources included observations from mediation sessions, formal recorded reviews, IEP meeting and due process hearing transcripts, legal documents, and field interviews of special education directors. Based on qualitative analysis, Scheffel, Rude, and Boyle shared five principles for adoption by school divisions to maximize compliance and minimize complaints:

1. The importance of teachers understanding special education laws and regulations. Teachers did not understand their role in the process, and parents conveyed the need for professional development for teachers to assist in gaining knowledge of special education regulations.
2. The need for IEP members being able to demonstrate understanding of the different areas of disabilities. It was important to parents that team members are able to verbalize their knowledge in the area special education disabilities without discussing teaching strategies that will be used.
3. The importance of fair-mindedness in special education directors and/or principals. It is important for parents to perceive administrators as allies in the process and thus appear invested in their child's success.
4. The need for expert level knowledge in the area of special education regulations.
5. The importance of presenting valid data to parents to indicate significant growth (Scheffel, Rude, & Boyle, 2005).

Mueller, Singer, and Draper's (2008) study discussed strategies that may lead to reducing parent dissatisfaction with school districts in the area of special education. The study took a phenomenological approach in examining two school districts that reduced the number of due process hearings requested against them. Researchers concluded a lack of leadership, not keeping up with new laws, and excluding parents as three areas leading to dissatisfaction with parents. The school districts used in this study started to see improvement in leadership, developing new partnerships, and educating teachers and parents after making changes in the administrative teams. It was concluded in the article that principals being replaced lacked knowledge in special education law and regulations, and could not communicate with parents during IEP meetings (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008).

Additional advice for avoiding complaints comes from Shuran and Roblyer's 2012 study, which recommended that school districts provide district level training for educators, administrators, and parents; that ongoing communication and positive relationships be fostered between schools and parents; and that schools should seek and expect support from district offices. Shuran and Roblyer (2012) recommend central office administration to offer the following:

1. Provide district-level training for educators and administrators—perhaps no one action could have more impact on decreasing litigation than establishing a formal, well-designed training program for school personnel. Training must emphasize not only special education law and requirements, as Yell et al. (2009) recommended, but also how to communicate with parents and when to seek help from district authorities. Since this kind of training requires a systematic, well-designed approach, and since it is the system, rather than the school, that will bear the expense of litigation, district-level resources are needed to support training.
2. Provide district-level training for parents—many problems can be circumvented by providing several sources of educational information for parents. In addition to in-person training, online information in the form of FAQs, explanations of common misperceptions, and where to go for information on often-needed topics are useful.
3. Foster ongoing communications and relationships between schools and parents—though formal training and information updates for parents are helpful, nothing can take the place of collaborative and caring relationships between school personnel and parents. How to foster these relationships must also be a topic of training.
4. Seek and expect support from district offices—the complexity of special education demands that school personnel rely on district personnel for support and counsel. (p. 63)

Role of Principals in Implementing IDEIA Mandates

The role of principals has been constantly expanding as new responsibilities have been added due to the implementation of new local, state, and national initiatives. Principals are no

longer being asked to be school managers, but also instructional leaders of their buildings. One of the responsibilities thrust upon administrators is to implement IDEIA mandates and ensure that staff members successfully provide students with disabilities the opportunity to become successful. This is a culture change for many administrators and a difficult task, as they are being asked to change perceptions of teachers and implement new instructional strategies. The successful development of special education programs depend on the support and expertise of the principal, while keeping abreast of trends and changes in the field (Patterson, Marshall, and Bowling, 2000). Principals must start with embracing this responsibility and taking steps to become knowledgeable of the mandates outlined in IDEIA. Administrator support in special education is a driving force in creating an environment that is conducive for both teachers and students. The Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) indicated principals need to address special education in five areas: organization, curriculum and instruction, professional development, climate, and student assessment (NAESP, 2001). Once principals have an understanding of IDEIA and the needs of students with disabilities, they will be able to provide productive support for everyone involved in the process. It is also imperative that administrators communicate to their staff the severity of potential consequences for not adhering to IDEIA mandates for the school division (NAESP, 2001).

Lynch's 2012 study discussed the changing role of a school administrator, and how the responsibilities have increased with the implementation of IDEIA. According to Lynch, administrators are being asked to be instructional leaders of the building, influencing the academic performance of all students - including those with disabilities. This expanded role includes special education matters, and Lynch also noted inadequate training for accomplishing this new challenge (Lynch, 2012).

Principals Preparation to Implement IDEIA Mandates

Principal preparation programs. Lasky and Karge's (2006) study examined the formal training of administrators and their ability to implement special education mandates. They examined programs designed by colleges and universities to prepare administrators, experience level of administrators, and the level of confidence administrators have in their ability to support and train teachers with regard to students with disabilities. Researchers received survey

responses from 205 southern California principals, and the quantitative study produced results that identified how administrators feel about the preparation process utilized by universities in the area of special education.

Administrators in Lasky and Karge's (2006) study felt that course work was needed in all aspects of special education law (Lasky & Karge, 2006). They expressed a desire for universities to develop courses in this very crucial area to prepare them to be successful administrators. Lasky and Karge also discussed the need for universities to include research based standards into the training programs. Participants in the study expressed concern of not being properly prepared in preparation programs and not being able to support teachers in the IEP process. Administrators understand the enormity of the responsibility being asked of them in the area of special education and are asking for changes in the way they are being prepared (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

In light of expanding IDEIA mandates and constantly changing special education laws, Witt (2003) surveyed department chairs in the United States (n=94) in universities with principal preparation programs to assess their perceptions of program effectiveness in the area of special education. Witt identified 525 programs throughout the United States and narrowed the list to 387 universities with principal preparation programs. The study attempted to examine the value of preparation programs and if the program includes key special education topics, how chairpersons of preparation programs perceive the effectiveness of the program, perceived needs of the program in the area of special education topics, changes chairpersons are planning to make to meet the needs of administrators in the area of special education, and what are the state requirements for preparation programs in the area of special education.

Witt's study found preparation programs did an adequate job of preparing administrators in the following nine important categories of special education: Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE), appropriate identification and evaluation of students, Individualized Education Program (IEP), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), parent and student participation in the decision-making process, procedural due process, discipline of student receiving special education services, case law pertaining to special education issues, and differentiated instruction specific to diverse learners. The researcher found a difference between what was reported as value and what chairpersons perceived as effectiveness in the program. When asked how much time was devoted to special education law, over 50% said they only devoted between 11-25% toward this area. The

perceived value placed on special education and that time devoted to special education did not persuade half of the chairpersons to make a change to the program. According to Witt, the university program chairs did not feel the need to change what was offered because there was no pressure from the state to do so. Witt's study showed that a small percentage of programs are making special education law a requirement.

Witt asserted programs preparing administrators to deal with special education issues will also have to change, or they will produce principals with inadequate skills in the area of special education. Further, Witt contended that administrator preparation programs lacked training for principals on how to implement IDEIA mandates to decrease the number of litigation cases (Witt, 2003).

Lynch's study (2012) noted a critical discrepancy between principals' preparation and practice. Over 75% of surveyed administrators stated they were involved in special education tasks, yet 50% of the administrators surveyed believed they lacked proper training in the area of special education while going through administrator preparation programs. Lynch noted that only eight states require special education training in their preparation programs, and subsequently recommended six areas for inclusion in all administrator preparation programs:

1. Fundamental knowledge of the legal aspects of a special education program.
 2. Better understanding of how school system policies for general education students affect students with disabilities.
 3. Understanding of how the school system's central office handles special education issues.
 4. Functional knowledge of inclusion and other current trends in special education.
 5. Instruction on how to create an inclusive school environment that supports students with disabilities.
 6. The ability to access "accurate and current information" regarding special education.
- (Lynch, p. 41)

According to Lynch, if preparation programs would consider including these six recommendations, they would likely produce administrators with a level of knowledge that

would lead to successful instructional leadership. Administrators would possess the skills necessary to complete the new responsibilities being asked of them.

Principals play a crucial role in improving education for students with disabilities, yet states do not mandate principal preparation programs to include coursework on special education law (Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison-Wade, 2005). Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison-Wade indicated principals feel unprepared while supervising special education programs. Principal preparation programs coursework traditionally concentrates on skills to serve general population students while providing limited skill development in the area of special education.

While Angelle and Bilton's (2009) study suggests most principals lack any background from coursework and field experience. Angelle and Bilton also indicated beginning principals completing one course in the area of special education increased their comfort level and handling responsibilities in the area of special education. While principals may have an increase in comfort after completing one course, findings indicated principal preparation programs failed to address pertinent areas in improving principal knowledge base in special education issues. Thus, leaving the burden on school divisions to provide professional development to keep principals abreast of current and accurate special education knowledge (Angelle and Bilton, 2009).

Professional development in special education from school divisions. If colleges and universities are not willing to offer courses specifically for special education law, school divisions have to take the lead and provide professional development for administrators (Rascoe, 2007). Interestingly, Price and Wells' (2013) study indicated Superintendents viewed a lack of professional development as a reason for failure to implement IDEIA mandates.

Hunley-Stukes's (2014) study discussed professional development offered in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Hunley-Stukes referenced the inadequacy of principal preparation programs and the responsibility of school divisions to provide quality professional development. The study included a survey of individuals with the responsibility of providing professional development for their school division. Results of the survey found school divisions offered the highest percentage of professional development in the area of instructional leadership followed by articulation of shared vision and school improvement. Legal and ethical issues accounted for 3.30% of professional development offered in the Commonwealth of Virginia (Hunley-Stukes, 2014).

Principals' Self-Reported Knowledge of Special Education

When principals perceive to have more knowledge than what is actually obtained, it can lead to very serious issues for school divisions (Hines, 2001). Principals that perceive to have knowledge of IDEIA mandates and special education laws but actually have inadequate knowledge could lead to substandard implementation of IDEIA mandates, leading to litigation and distrust with parents.

Hines's (2001) study indicated that principals identified their level of knowledge in the area of special education law as adequate, but when asked to complete a 21 question scenario based survey, they were unable to provide correct answers on how to implement IDEIA mandates. Hines indicated in her study that principals are in need of special education law coursework or professional development to facilitate building administrators' acquisition of skills required to provide effective and adequate leadership in the management of special education programs. School divisions are putting the future of students with disabilities at risk by allowing administrators to make decisions with limited knowledge or strategies to implement these mandates correctly (Hines, 2001).

Taylor's (2005) surveyed private school administrators in Tennessee to determine if the purpose of the school affected the services being provided to students with disabilities. Participants expressed the need to be knowledgeable of special education laws and regulations. They also understood the importance of providing students with disabilities with services, but struggled with understanding the appropriateness of the services being provided. Participants expressed the need for more training so they could successfully make these vital decisions. Public school administrators struggle with the same issues and have similar concerns when making decisions on services for students with disabilities (Taylor, 2005).

Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell's (2006) study focused on special education knowledge in two domains—fundamental and current issues. Fundamental knowledge covered basic understanding of the history of special education as well as five common areas principals should have knowledge in the area of special education. Those areas were listed as professional practice, all teachers teaching all students, characteristics of disabilities, legislation, and learning differences. Current issues referred to changes in special education initiatives and legislation. Participants for the study included secondary administrators that were members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Over 90% of the participants responding to the survey did not have a background in special education and had limited training in the area. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell's (2006) study showed that participants felt comfortable with fundamental knowledge, while having concern with current issues. Administrators discussed the need for professional development to keep them current with the changes in the area of special education. The study also determined that administrators with high levels of knowledge were active participants in special education programs in the building. Administrators with high levels of knowledge also had regular meetings with teachers working with students with disabilities. Administrators with a background in special education included in the study expressed a high level of confidence when facing situations dealing with students with disabilities. Researchers for this study concluded that it would be advantageous for division leaders to invest in training for administrators, and allow them to build confidence in the area of special education (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006).

Milner (2006) conducted a quantitative study in the state of Alabama with a concentration on principals' knowledge level of IDEIA and discipline mandates. The study attempted to determine if principals understood how to properly give consequences to students with disabilities when they violate the code of conduct. Principals (n=166) were asked about their years of experience, the location and size of their school, their academic degree, professional development completed, percentage of special education students enrolled in school and the level of knowledge of IDEIA mandates on student discipline. The survey instrument included questions, scenarios, demographic information of the respondents, and a section for comments or concerns related to IDEIA.

Milner reported no statistically significant relationship between levels of knowledge in the area of IDEIA mandates on student discipline and years of service, region, size of school, degree attained, or percentage of special education students enrolled in school. Milner, however, did report a significant relationship between professional development and knowledge of IDEIA discipline mandates. Special education process was the professional development session that showed a small increase in IDEIA discipline mandates knowledge level. Comments written by the respondents expressed concern in the following areas: policies that could lead to litigation, stay-put provisions, and students with disabilities being denied due process (Milner, 2006).

Power's (2007) quantitative study concentrated on the level of knowledge in the area of special education law by Virginia principals. Power used a survey of 24 hypothetical scenarios that concentrated on the following areas of IDEA: FAPE, due process, IEP, LRE, related services, student discipline, and liability for reimbursement of parents. Power's study was conducted as a result of the increased number of litigation cases against school divisions for violations of special education law, mandates driven by IDEA, and the increased role of the principal. The study attempted to answer questions concerning the grade levels being served by the principal, the age, gender, number of courses taken, years of experience of the principal, and finally the occurrence of litigation of special education safeguards in relation to the level of knowledge of the principal.

Respondents of Power's survey included 236 principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia with varying levels of experience and grade levels being served. The findings for question one of Power's study determined there was not a significant difference in a principals' knowledge and if they are employed at the primary, elementary, or secondary level. There was also no significant difference between knowledge of special education law and the gender, age, years of experience, or degree earned by the principal. Power's study did show weaknesses in the following areas of FAPE: transfer students within the state and their special education services, and parents' requests for independent evaluations to be paid for by the school district. Respondents of the study also had a weakness in the area of law regarding extracurricular activities and transportation as a change in placement and full day nursing services.

Rascoe's (2007) study examined the educational background, knowledge of special education, and perceptions of special education and supervisory ability of Virginia high school principals. Upon analysis of the 98 returned surveys, Rascoe found significant areas of weakness in the areas of FAPE and knowledge of assessment of students with disabilities. The study did not find significant relationships between issues with the educational background or knowledge of special education and the principals' level of knowledge of special education. Principals had a very positive perception of special education and promoted acceptance of an inclusive setting for students (Rascoe, 2007).

Ivey's (2008) quantitative study surveyed special education directors of school divisions in Virginia, those with the responsibility for special education services and in-depth knowledge of special education law, to determine their level of knowledge in the area of special education in

the following categories: FAPE, due process, IEP, LRE, related services, student discipline, and liability for reimbursement to parents. The purpose Ivey's study was to explore the relationship between the characteristics of administrators in Virginia school divisions and the administrator's knowledge, and if previous working experience and coursework made a difference with the performance of the individual. The assessment survey completed by the 84 special education directors consisted of 22 hypothetical scenarios of current legal issues in the area of special education law.

Ivey reported FAPE as an area of weakness, with the main issue being in the area of parent request for individual evaluation and special education services for students who transfer intrastate and interstate. Respondents of the study also showed a weakness when faced with the question of student discipline and if a ten day suspension was considered a change in placement, as well as deciding if parents have the right to appeal the decision of the manifestation determination team. Respondents performed well in the area of LEA, due process, and the IEP process (Ivey, 2008).

In exploring the relationship of the characteristics of the school division and the knowledge of the administrator in the area of special education law, Ivey reported no significant relationship between the size of school division and the level of knowledge demonstrated by the administrator. Lastly, neither teacher experience, numbers of years of experience as a special education director, nor professional development offered by the division played a significant relationship in the level of knowledge of the participant (Ivey, 2008).

Synthesis of the Studies

Current research indicates that principals are being asked to fulfill many roles mainly that of instructional leader, tasked with providing quality instruction for all students. Unfortunately, research indicates principals are not prepared to handle the implementation of IDEIA mandates and special education law regulations, reporting an inadequate level of knowledge in the area of special education law. Also of concern was the discrepancy between principals perception of special education law compared to their actual knowledge of special education law. (Rascoe, 2007)

This discrepancy between necessary and actual knowledge of special education emerged from Rascoe's study as a theme, as did two recommendations: modifications to coursework at

the preparation program level as well as changes to professional development for in-service administrators. According to researchers Lynch (2012), Taylor (2005), Lasky & Karge (2006), preparation programs need to be revamped to include courses dealing with special education law. Further, researchers believe that school divisions need to invest in professional development to increase the knowledge level of principals, as a strategy to decrease costs associated with litigation.

Future research is recommended in the area of how to improve administrator preparation programs to include adequate skills and knowledge of special education law. Future research might include what professional development opportunities would best assist to keep current administrators current with changes in special education laws. This could lead to a decline in litigation against school divisions for failure to comply with special education laws and IDEIA.

Chapter 3

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education.

Research Design/Methodology

Data collection for this study took the form of a survey. A quantitative methodology was employed in this study, as traditional mathematical and statistical means are useful to measure results (Shuttleworth, 2008) and describe patterns within the population of Virginia public school principals. This method of research is best suited for this type of study as the data collected will be primarily numerical (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative research allows the researcher to explore the relationship between dependent and independent variables (Pole, 2007). In this study, the independent variables were principal context, perceptions of principal knowledge of special education, professional development participation, higher education preparation, and perceptions of factors leading to complaints. The dependent variable was the rate of formal parent complaints related to special education.

Data were collected from principals in a sampling of divisions that have high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints, and patterns in principal characteristics, as indicated on their survey, will be analyzed descriptively. Butin (2010) proposes that quantitative research allow the researcher to use Likert-type scales to quantify the data collected. Quantitative methods will allow for direct investigation of the research questions. The researcher can then use the data to identify patterns, themes and distinct perspectives among the participants (Butin, 2010).

A descriptive method is typically used in quantitative research. The data are collected and analyzed in its present state, qualities of a specific phenomenon may be identified through observation, or the relationship between two or more phenomena are explored (Creswell, 2003). This form of research can be a very effective way to examine the data and either support or

dispute other claims (Creswell, 2003). The standardized methods used in the quantitative method of data collection have been noted to be more accurate and less subjective than qualitative methods (Pole, 2007). The data can then be simulated and examined using statistical methods (Pole, 2007). For these reasons a quantitative study was designed to explore the relationship between incidents and principal preparation.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What patterns emerge in principals' professional contexts in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
2. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of their special education knowledge in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
3. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of relevant professional development offered in the area of special education in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
4. What patterns emerge in coursework in college or university principal preparation programs in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
5. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of factors contributing to parent complaints in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was principals in public schools in Virginia. Sampling can be described as purposeful and representative. Data from the Virginia Department of Education's Annual Report of the Dispute Resolution Systems and Administrative Services from 2011-2012 were consulted to determine which school divisions would be included in the study.

First, the number of complaints, including due process hearings and mediation cases, filed in each school division was divided by the special education student population, also provided in the report. This gave a ratio of complaints per child in special education for the division. This list was sorted from high to low, resulting in high incidence on top and no incidences of complaints at the bottom.

During the 2011-2012 school year, 12 school divisions with a total of 189 schools were selected with high percentages of parent complaints in the area of special education filed against them with ratios ranging from 0.022-0.003. In that same school year, 72 school divisions, representing 485 schools, did not have any parent complaints filed against them. From this group of 72 divisions and 485 schools, the researcher chose a representative sample of 21 divisions and 189 schools giving consideration to geography. At least one school division was chosen from each of the eight Virginia Superintendent's Regions, and attempts were made to include small, medium, and large school divisions. Also considered was including a comparable number of schools in each region, which would translate to equal numbers of participants, since one principal serves at each school. Table 1 summarizes the sampling choices.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher sought and obtained permission from Power to use her 2007 survey instrument (see Appendix A). Following successful defense of prospectus, the researcher sought and received approval to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B & C) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Following approval, a list of principal email addresses was obtained from school and division websites chosen through sampling procedures. Principals employed in the selected school divisions (n=378) were emailed an introductory letter (see Appendix D) requesting participation and providing them with a link to the electronic survey (see Appendix E). The researcher emailed two reminders to participants to complete the survey. After the second email the researcher stopped communication with the participant. Reminder emails were sent one week apart to give potential participants the opportunity to complete the survey.

Table 1

Superintendent Region Breakdown

Region #	Location	# Divisions in Region	#/% High incidence divisions sampled in region	# Schools represented in high incidence divisions sampled	#/% No incidence divisions sampled in region	# Schools represented in no incidence divisions sampled
1	Greater Richmond area - Central Virginia	15	4/ (27%)	20	4/ (27%)	19
2	Hampton Roads/Tidewater	16	5/ (31%)	147	1/ (6%)	23
3	Northern Neck	17	4/ (24%)	18	6/ (35%)	17
4	Northern Virginia	19	1/ (5%)	4	2/ (11%)	27
5	Shenandoah Valley	20	0/ (0%)	0	1/ (5%)	26
6	Western Virginia	15	0/ (0%)	0	2/ (13%)	25
7	Southwestern Virginia	19	0/ (0%)	0	2/ (11%)	30
8	Southside/ South Central Virginia	12	0/ (0%)	0	3/ (25%)	22
	Total	133	14 (9%)	189	21/ (16%)	189

Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher used a web-based survey tool, to gather responses from participants. A direct link to the survey instrument was provided in all written communication to principals to facilitate easy access. Upon closing of the data gathering window, after all attempts were made

to contact remaining potential participants, responses were examined in aggregate and transferred from web-based survey tool to the JMP program for analysis.

Instrument Design

For this study, the researcher used an adaptation of Power's 2007 survey to collect responses from potential participants. The base of the instrument was kept intact, but the term litigation was changed to complaints, the section giving hypothetical situations was omitted, and questions were added and omitted to address principals' perceived knowledge in the area of special education and the quality of professional development offered to principals by their divisions. The 19 question survey determined demographic information of participants, years of experience as a teacher and principal, special education administrative or law courses completed in college and university programs, professional development offered by their current school division, and if they were the principal while complaints were filed against the school.

Instrument Validation

Power's 2007 study included information on instrument validity. The survey instrument was piloted with 11 in-service principals seeking their doctorates through Virginia Tech in the program of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in Blacksburg, Virginia. After reviewing comments and suggestions, Power administered the survey a second time to nine principals and five central office employees attending a law course in Richmond, Virginia offered through Virginia Tech as well as to 17 teachers and 1 professor taking a course through Virginia Tech at the Hampton Roads Center. Kathleen Mehfoud, J.D., special education attorney, and Dr. Jimmie Fortune, one of Power's committee members, reviewed and made suggestions on strategies to improve the survey instrument. Cohorts were administered the survey again after changes based on Mehfoud and Fortune feedback, and the instrument was finalized (Power, 2007).

The researcher validated the instrument by first sending the document to a research consultant for suggestions and comments. The instrument was revised and sent to three special education experts and members of the 2012 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral cohort in Richmond, Virginia. The researcher and consultant revised the survey instrument using suggestions and comments provided by the special education expert group and four members of the 2012 doctoral cohort in Richmond, Virginia. As a final check for validity the

researcher and consultant reorganized the revised question by research question to ensure alignment and adequate coverage.

Data Treatment

While the survey asked for the name of the school division in which principals are employed, it did not include fields for school name or the name of the respondent, keeping their responses anonymous. The survey results were kept confidential, with access only being available to the researcher and committee chairs. Additionally, results of the survey were reported in aggregate, identifying themes and patterns among divisions with high or no complaint incidences at the regional and state level, so as to maintain confidentiality and anonymity in reporting.

Data Management

Electronic data collection through the web-based survey tool were uploaded into JMP software for further analysis. Files were stored on the researcher's tablet with password protection. Any digital or printed copies of the data file were kept in a locked box and will be destroyed at completion of final defense.

Data Analysis Techniques

The research study used quantitative data compiled from returned survey responses. Data were analyzed using JMP computer software. JMP computer software is used to create statistical data analysis and reports for the researcher to determine patterns in principal responses based on their employment in divisions with high or no incidences of special education complaints. Statistical analysis included measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode, and standard deviation), frequencies, and percentages of the data collected at the state and regional level, by high or no incidence groups.

Time Line

Following prospectus in Fall of 2014, the researcher began the IRB process. Following approval, the researcher began data collection, which was completed by November 2014. Data analysis took place between November and December of 2014, and a written report of findings was submitted prior to the final defense in March of 2015.

Methodology Summary

The methodology employed in this study is designed to investigate patterns of principal characteristics in school divisions with high or no incidences of parent complaints regarding special education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. A previously validated instrument (Power, 2007) was adapted to gather information from potential participants regarding their years of experience, perception of special education knowledge, perception of relevant professional development offered, and coursework completed in college or university principal preparation programs.

Chapter 4

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This chapter summarizes the research procedures used and data collected from participating principals. The data collected for this study could be used to improve principal preparation and on-going professional development in the area of special education. Data gathered have been organized and discussed by research question.

Response Rate

The 19 question survey was sent electronically via email to the 378 eligible principals in the 35 high and no incidence school divisions and the Commonwealth of Virginia, 104 participants responded, yielding a return rate of 28%. The researcher was able to get responses from at least one principal in 29 of the identified 35 school divisions. Table 2 shows the 378 potential participants, 104 actual participants, and return rate calculated by each of Virginia's eight superintendent regions. Region 3 represented the highest return rate of 71% and region 8 represented the lowest return rate of 14%. The geographic representation of survey respondents suggests a heavy weighting of perspectives from principals in Region 3. This could be because of the professional relationships the researcher has with educational leaders in this area, due to his employment.

Table 2

Overall Responses by Superintendent's Regions

Region	Region returned	Region sent	Region percentage
1	8	39	18%
2	40	170	24%
3	25	35	71%
4	10	31	32%
5	4	26	15%
6	4	25	16%
7	10	30	33%
8	3	22	14%
TOTAL	104	378	28%

Table 3 shows the 189 potential principals who represent a school divisions with high incidences of formal special education complaints and the 58 actual respondents, yielding a response rate of 31% within this sampling subcategory. Region 2 and region 3 represented the lowest and highest return rate among high incidences principal participants with 24% and 78% respectively. Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8 were not sampled in the high incidence category, because these regions did not have any divisions that met the criteria to be included in the study. The researcher received responses from at least 1 principal in each of the 14 high incidence school divisions' sampled from regions 1, 2, 3, and 4. The data suggest a heavy representation from Superintendent Regions 2 and 3.

Table 3

Respondents by High Incidences in Superintendent Region

Region	High incidences returned	High incidences sent	High incidences return rate percentage
1	6	20	30%
2	36	147	24%
3	14	18	78%
4	2	4	50%
5	0	0	0%
6	0	0	0%
7	0	0	0%
8	0	0	0%
TOTAL	58	189	31%

Table 4 is a tabulation of potential and actual principal participants by region in the category of no incidences. The highest return rate in the no incidences category was region 3 with 78%. Region 1 had the lowest return rate in this category with 11%. The researcher did not get a response from 6 of the sampled 21 school divisions in the no incidence category, however at least one principal participated in each of the Superintendent’s regions. Results suggest Regions 3 and 4 respondents as the most represented areas in the no incidence category, again, likely because of the professional networks of the researcher.

Table 4

Responses by Principals in No Incidence School Divisions by Superintendent’s Regions

Region	No incidences returned	No incidences sent	No incidences return rate percentage
1	2	19	11%
2	4	23	17%
3	11	17	65%
4	8	27	30%
5	4	26	15%
6	4	25	16%
7	10	30	33%
8	3	22	14%
TOTAL	46	189	24%

Table 5 summarizes the return rate by Superintendent’s region, disaggregated by high and no incidence categories. Again, no divisions met the criteria for high incidence divisions in Regions 5, 6, 7, or 8, this explaining the 0% return rate. Results suggest heavy representation of principals’ perspectives in regions 2 and 3.

Table 5

Participating Principals by Region

Region	#/% High incidence principals in region	#/% No incidence principals in region	#/% High and no incidence principals in region
1	6/ (10%)	2/ (4%)	8/ (8%)
2	36/ (62%)	4/ (8%)	40/ (38%)
3	14/ (24%)	11/ (14%)	25/ (24%)
4	2/ (3%)	8/ (7%)	10/ (10%)
5	0/ (0%)	4/ (9%)	4/ (4%)
6	0/ (0%)	4/ (9%)	4/ (4%)
7	0/ (0%)	10/ (22%)	10/ (10%)
8	0/ (0%)	3/ (7%)	3/ (3%)
Total/ % of combined	58/ (56%)	46/ (44%)	104/ (100%)

Research Question 1: What patterns emerge in principals’ professional contexts in school divisions with high or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?

Grade level of current school. Nearly half of all respondents represent the perspective of current elementary school principals, despite including principals at all grade levels to participate in school divisions meeting the high or no incidence criteria. Approximately 20% of respondents represent middle and high schools respectively with another 11-13% representing non-traditional grade ranges. Representation of principals at each grade band are consistent in the subcategories of high or no incidence, with the difference ranging from 2% to 7%. Table 6 summarizes the school contexts of responding principals. Participation data suggest heavy weighting towards perceptions of elementary principals in this study.

Table 6

Participating Principals by Grade Level

Grade level	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Elementary K-5	28/ (52%)	21/ (46%)	49/ (49%)
Middle 6-8	11/ (20%)	8/ (17%)	19/ (19%)
High 9-12	9/ (17%)	11/ (24%)	20/ (20%)
Other	6/ (11%)	6/ (13%)	12/ (12%)
Total/ % of combined	54/ (54%)	46/ (46%)	100/ (100%)

Longevity in current job. Table 7 represents years spent in respondents current position. Responses of respondents indicated that 68% were within their first five years in current position. This band represented the largest discrepancy between high and no incidence respondents with an 11% differential. The remaining bands were within the 2%-6% differential range in subcategories. Only 6% of the respondents had served in their current position more than 16 years. Data suggest the majority of respondents are new to their current principalship.

Table 7

Participating Principals by Years at Current Position

Years in current position	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
1-5	34/ (63%)	34/ (74%)	68/ (68%)
6-10	7/ (13%)	6/ (13%)	13/ (13%)
11-15	8/ (15%)	5/ (11%)	13/ (13%)
16-20	3/ (6%)	0/ (0%)	3/ (3%)
21-30	2/ (4%)	0/ (0%)	2/ (2%)
31+	0/ (0%)	1/ (2%)	1/ (1%)
Total/ % of combined	54/ (54%)	46/ (46%)	100/ (100%)

Degree in special education. Over 80% of the respondents reported that they did not have a degree in special education. Principals in the subcategory band of no incidence reported that 24% had a degree in special education. This represented an 11% difference with principals in the high incidence category, as only 13% of high incidence respondents reported a special education degree. Table 8 summarizes frequency of special education degrees by subcategory. Results suggest the majority of responding principals do not hold degrees in special education.

Table 8

Participating Principals by special education Degree

Special education degree	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	7/ (13%)	11/ (24%)	18/ (18%)
No	47/ (87%)	35/ (76%)	82/ (82%)
Total/ % of combined	54/ (54%)	46/ (46%)	100/ (100%)

Teaching experience in special education. Survey data indicated approximately three-fourths of the responding principals had no experience as a teacher in the area of special education, with a greater percentage (83%) coming from high incidence divisions compared to no incidence divisions (67%). Respondents in the subcategory band of no incidence reported 33% had experience teaching special education compared to 17% of high incidence principals. Table 9 summarizes the special education teaching experience of responding principals. Results suggest the majority of respondents do not bring special education teaching experience to the principalship.

Table 9

Participating Principals by Teaching Experience in Special Education

Teaching experience in special education	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	9/ (17%)	15/ (33%)	24/ (24%)
No	45/ (83%)	31/ (67%)	76/ (76%)
Total/ % of combined	54/ (54%)	46/ (46%)	100/ (100%)

Endorsement in special education. Approximately 19% of respondents had an endorsement in special education, with high incidence principals reporting fewer endorsements (15%) than no incidence principals (24%), as indicated in table 10. Representation of principals for each response indicated a 9% differential between high and no incidence respondents. Results suggest the majority of respondents have not earned an endorsement in special education.

Table 10

Participating Principals with Special Education Endorsement

Special education endorsement	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	8/ (15%)	11/ (24%)	19/ (19%)
No	46/ (85%)	34/ (76%)	80/ (81%)
Total/ % of combined	54/ (55%)	45/ (45%)	99/ (100%)

Assistant principal experience. Table 11 is a tabulation of years of experience as an assistant principal. Nearly 60% of the respondents served between 1-5 years as an assistant principal, and approximately 30% had 6-10 years of experience in this entry-level administrative role. These two experience spans included the majority of the responses, with a differential of 10%-8% respectively between subgroups. This table also indicates six of the respondents had no assistant principal experience before becoming a principal. Data suggest that nearly 90% of respondents served 1-10 years as an assistant principal before becoming a principal.

Table 11

Participating Principals by Years as Assistant Principal

Years as an assistant principal	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
0	2/ (4%)	4/ (9%)	6/ (6%)
1-5	33/ (61%)	23/ (51%)	56/ (57%)
6-10	16/ (30%)	17/ (38%)	33/ (33%)
11-15	3/ (6%)	1/ (2%)	4/ (4%)
16-20	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
21-30	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
31+	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
Total/ % of combined	54/ (55%)	45/ (45%)	99/ (100%)

Research Question 2: What patterns emerge in principals’ perceptions of their special education knowledge in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?

Special education duties while serving as assistant principal. Table 12 is a summarization of perceived duties as assistant principal in the area of special education.

Subcategories of high and no incidence were consistent in each band, with the difference ranging from 1% to 3%. Approximately 5% of respondents did not have any duties in the area of special education. This may include some of the 6 principals who never held the position of assistant principal. Results suggest that 94% of principals had some administrative responsibility in the area of special education before entering the role of principal.

Table 12

Participating Principals by Special Education Duties as Assistant Principal

Duties as assistant principal	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
None	2/ (4%)	3/ (7%)	5/ (5%)
Some	29/ (56%)	23/ (55%)	52/ (55%)
Exclusively	21/ (40%)	16/ (38%)	37/ (39%)
Total/ % of combined	52/ (55%)	42/ (45%)	94/ (100%)

Special education duties while serving as principal. Participating principals indicated in Table 13 that 78% have at least some responsibility in the area of special education. This includes 83% of respondents in high incidence subcategory, compared to 71% of no incidence principals. Approximately 19% of all respondents indicated they were exclusively responsible for duties related to special education, and a 14% difference was found between subcategories, as 13% of high incidence principals exclusively handled special education compared to 27% of no incidence divisions. Table 13 identified 3 respondents having no special education duties while serving as principal, with 2 of the 3 coming from high incidence divisions. Results suggest that 97% of respondents in this study still participate in at least some special education duties while serving as principal.

Table 13

Participating Principals by Special Education duties as Principal

Special education duty responsibilities	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
None	2/ (4%)	1/ (2%)	3/ (3%)
Some	44/ (83%)	32/ (71%)	76/ (78%)
Exclusively	7/ (13%)	12/ (27%)	19/ (19%)
Total/ % of combined	53/ (54%)	45/ (46%)	98/ (100%)

Perceived special education knowledge. While most respondents rated their special education knowledge as sufficient, no incidence principals did so at a higher rate (82% compared to 75% and high incidence divisions). As for the extreme categories, for both the insufficient and exceptional perceptions of special education knowledge, the high incidence subcategory reported a higher percentage, with a difference of 4% and 3% respectively. Results suggest respondents' perceived knowledge is sufficient, with more principals from high incidence school divisions indicating exceptional perceived knowledge.

Table 14

Participating Principals Perceived Special Education Knowledge

Perceived special education knowledge	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Insufficient	2/ (4%)	0/ (0%)	2/ (2%)
Sufficient	40/ (75%)	37/ (82%)	77/ (79%)
Exceptional	11/ (21%)	8/ (18%)	19/ (19%)
Total/ % of combined	53/ (54%)	45/ (46%)	98/ (100%)

Research Question 3: What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of relevant professional development offered in the area of special education in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?

Keeping abreast of special education best practices and trends. Table 15 is a tabulation of how respondents keep abreast with best practices and trends in special education. Division-provided professional development received the most responses in the two subcategories of high and no incidence divisions, with 24% and 25% respectively. Additionally, 8% of the principals responded with "other," with no incidence respondents networking with internal and external sources. High incidence principals responding with "other" indicated the use of internal sources only for networking. Sources of information for principals representing high incidence ranked in the following order from most to least dimensions:

1. Division professional development
2. Information from professional organizations
3. VDOE provided professional development

4. Reading special education law reviews
5. Reading outcomes of court cases
6. Interaction with school attorney
7. Other
8. Subscription to listservs
9. Privately provided professional development

Responses of no incidence principals ranked list was the same, with the exception of second and third ranking sources:

1. Division professional development
2. VDOE provided professional development
3. Information from professional organizations
4. Reading special education law reviews
5. Reading outcomes of court cases
6. Other
7. Interaction with school attorney
8. Subscription to listservs
9. Privately provided professional development

Results suggest professional organizations are the main source for providing principals with updated information related to special education law.

Table 15

How Participating Principals Keep Abreast with Best Practices and Trends in SPED

How principals keep abreast with best practices	# Of high incidence principals	# Of no incidence principals	# Of high and no incidence principals
Reading SPED law reviews	24/ (12%)	19/ (14%)	43/ (13%)
Reading outcomes of court cases	23/ (12%)	17/ (13%)	40/ (12%)
Division PD Development	46/ (24%)	34/ (25%)	80/ (24%)
VDOE provided PD	27/ (14%)	24/ (18%)	51/ (15%)
Privately Provided PD	5/ (3%)	3/ (2%)	8/ (2%)
Information from professional organizations	33/ (18%)	22/ (16%)	55/ (17%)
Subscriptions to list-servs	6/ (3%)	3/ (2%)	9/ (3%)
Interaction with school attorney	22/ (11%)	5/ (4%)	27/ (8%)
Other	9/ (5%)	9/ (7%)	18/ (5%)
Total/% of combined	195/ (59%)	136/ (41%)	331/ (100%)

Participation in relevant professional development at some point during career. Nearly 95% of all respondents indicated they participated in relevant professional development at some point in their career. High and no incidence categories had only a difference of 1% in yes and no bands. Table 16 summarizes principals’ participation in relevant professional development at some point in their career. Results suggest a vast majority of respondents have participated in relevant professional development in legal aspects of special education at some point in their career.

Table 16

Participating Principals' Participation in Relevant Professional Development at Some Point in Their Career.

Participated in relevant PD at some point in career	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	49/ (94%)	42/ (95%)	91/ (95%)
No	3/ (6%)	2/ (5%)	5/ (5%)
Total/ % of combined	52/ (54%)	44/ (46%)	96/ (100%)

Participated in relevant professional development during the last five years. Table 17 summarizes respondents' participation in relevant professional development in the area of special education during the last five years. Overall, 93% of participants participated in relevant professional development within this timeframe, with only a 3% differential between high incidence and no incidence divisions. Data suggest respondents' in both school division subcategories have participated in relevant professional development related to legal aspects of special education during the last five years.

Table 17

Participated in Relevant Professional Development During the Last Five (5) Years.

Participated in relevant PD during the last 5 years	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	49/ (94%)	39/ (91%)	88/ (93%)
No	3/ (6%)	4/ (9%)	7/ (7%)
Total/ % of Combined	52/ (55%)	43/ (45%)	95/ (100%)

Participating in ongoing relevant professional development. Table 18 indicated that 51% of the overall respondents participated in relevant professional development in the area of special education on an ongoing basis. However, an unexpected gap between the 2 categories, as 58% of the respondents from high incidence divisions reported participating in ongoing relevant professional development, whereas only 43% of principals from no incidence divisions reported ongoing, relevant professional development.

Results suggest principals from divisions with no incidence of parent complaints participating in on-going professional development opportunities in the area of special education law more often than principals from divisions with high incidence of parents' complaints.

Table 18

Participates in Relevant Professional Development on an Ongoing Basis

Participates in ongoing relevant PD	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	30/ (58%)	19/ (43%)	49/ (51%)
No	22/ (42%)	25/ (57%)	47/ (49%)
Total/ % of combined	52/ (54%)	44/ (46%)	96/ (100%)

Organizations providing relevant professional development. Respondents cited their current school division as the most frequently used organization providing relevant professional development in the area of special education. VDOE and their previous school divisions were mentioned second and third respectively as organizations where they received relevant professional development in the area of special education. Included in Table 19 were 25 responses of “other,” with 7% of respondents indicating TTAC as a relevant professional development provider receiving the most mentions in this band with a total of seven with three coming from no incidence divisions and 4 coming from high incidence divisions. Results suggest that both school divisions and the VDOE provide principals with relevant professional development in the area of special education law.

Table 19

Organizations Providing Relevant Professional Development

Organizations providing relevant professional development	# High incidence principals	# No incidence principals	# High and no incidence principals
Current School Division	49/ (43%)	30/ (37%)	79/ (41%)
Previous School Division	21/ (19%)	15/ (19%)	36/ (19%)
VDOE	30/ (27%)	24/ (30%)	54/ (28%)
Other	13/ (12%)	12/ (15%)	25/ (13%)
None	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
Total/ % of combined	113/ (58%)	81/ (42%)	194/ (100%)

Research Question 4: What Patterns Emerge in Coursework in College or University Principal Preparation Programs in School Divisions with High Incidences or No Incidences of Parent Complaints for Special Education?

Coursework surrounding legal topics in special education. Tables 20-23 summarize the number of courses completed by respondents at the undergraduate and graduate level, principal preparation program, and post principal preparation program.

As Table 20 demonstrates, despite comparable mean, median and mode values for undergraduate coursework, there was more variation in the number of courses related to legal aspects of special education in the no incidence subcategory. Due to the relative uniformity in undergraduate programming in education programs, the skew to lower values (0, 1, or 2 courses) was expected. Results suggest the majority of respondents in both subcategories have completed at least one course in legal topics surrounding special education at the undergraduate level.

Table 20

Number of Courses Surrounding Legal Topics in Special Education at the Undergraduate Level

Number of undergrad courses/ (median, mode, and mean)	# High incidence principals	# No incidence principals	# High and no incidence principals
0	15/ (35%)	12/ (38%)	27/ (36%)
1	15/ (35%)	6/ (19%)	21/ (28%)
2	9/ (21%)	10/ (31%)	19/ (25%)
3	1/ (2%)	2/ (6%)	3/ (4%)
4	0/ (0%)	1/ (3%)	1/ (1%)
5	1/ (2%)	1/ (3%)	2/ (3%)
6	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
7	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
8	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
9	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
10	2/ (5%)	0/ (0%)	2/ (3%)
Total/ % of combined	42/ (68%)	20/ (32%)	62/ (100%)
Median	1	1	1
Mode	01	0	0
Mean	1.5	1.3	1.4

As Table 21 shows, at the graduate level, there was more of a gap in mean values for courses taken (ranging from 1.5 to 1.9), but the most common response from both subcategories of principals was 1 course. Results suggest principals in both subcategories have similar

experiences with coursework at the graduate level, with the majority completing at least one course.

Table 21

Number of Courses Surrounding Legal Topics in Special Education at the Graduate Level

Number of grad courses/ (median, mode, and mean)	# High incidence principals	# No incidence principals	# High and no incidence principals
0	8/ (17%)	6/ (18%)	14/ (17%)
1	19/ (40%)	15/ (44%)	34/ (42%)
2	14/ (30%)	8/ (24%)	22/ (27%)
3	3/ (6%)	1/ (3%)	4/ (5%)
4	2/ (4%)	2/ (6%)	4/ (5%)
5	0/ (0%)	2/ (6%)	2/ (2%)
6	1/ (2%)	0/ (0%)	1/ (1%)
Total/ % of combined	47/ (58%)	34/ (42%)	81/ (100%)
Median	1	1	1
Mode	1	1	1
Mean	1.5	1.9	1.5

As Table 22 demonstrates, respondents indicated in both subgroups a response of 16% not completing any courses, which is likely due to the relative uniformity in programming among principal preparation programs. Results suggest a majority of respondents completed at least one course in legal aspects of special education during their principal preparation program.

Table 22

Number of Courses Surrounding Legal Topics in Special Education During Principal Preparation Program

Number of courses during principal preparation program/ (median, mode, and Mean)	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
0	7/ (16%)	5/ (16%)	12/ (16%)
1	25/ (58%)	20/ (65%)	45/ (61%)
2	9/ (21%)	6/ (19%)	15/ (20%)
3	1/ (2%)	0/ (0%)	1/ (1%)
4	0	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
5	0	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
6	1/ (2%)	0/ (0%)	1/ (1%)
Total/% of combined	43/ (58 %)	31/ (42%)	74/ (100%)
Median	1	1	1
Mode	1	1	1
Mean	1.2	1	1.1

Lastly, Table 23 representing post-principal preparation program education demonstrates some gaps between the two subgroups, as more high incidence principals report no further coursework in the legal aspects of special education (54%) compared to those in no incidence divisions (42%). Furthermore, there are more individuals in the no incidence category that report taking upwards of two or more classes in legal aspects of special education, yielding a higher mean value of 1.5 compared to 1.1 for high incidence divisions. Results suggest that principal respondents from no incidence school divisions have completed, on average, more coursework addressing legal aspects of special education than their peers from high incidence divisions.

Table 23

Number of Courses Surrounding Legal Topics in Special Education Post Principal Preparation Program

Number of courses beyond Principal Prep Program/ (median, mode, and mean)	#/% High incidence principals in region	#/% No incidence principals in region	#/% High and no incidence principals in region
0	19/ (54%)	10/ (42%)	29(49%)
1	6/ (17%)	4/ (17%)	10/ (17%)
2	4/ (11%)	3/ (13%)	7/ (12%)
3	3/ (9%)	5/ (21%)	8/ (14%)
4	1/ (3%)	1/ (4%)	2/ (3%)
5	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
6	2/ (6%)	0/ (0%)	2/ (3%)
7	0/ (0%)	1/ (4%)	1/ (2%)
Total/% of combined	35/ (59%)	24/ (41%)	59/ (100%)
Median	0	1	1
Mode	0	0	0
Mean	1.1	1.5	1.5

Research Question 5: What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of factors contributing to parent complaints in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?

Principals involved in Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) complaints. Overall, 71% of the respondents were never involved in a formal parent complaint. There was a 3% difference in subcategories high and no incidence, with a high of 31% being reported by high incidence respondents. Table 25 summarizes if principals were ever involved in a formal V DOE complaint, but does not indicate if the complaint occurred in their current position. Results suggest a heavy representation of principals that have never been involved in a formal special education complaint.

Table 24

Participating Principals' Involvement in Formal Parent VDOE Complaints

Have you been involved in parent VDOE complaint	#/% High incidence principals	#/% No incidence principals	#/% High and no incidence principals
Yes	16/ (31%)	12/ (27%)	28/ (29%)
No	36/ (69%)	32/ (73%)	68/ (71%)
Total/ % of combined	52/ (54%)	44/ (46%)	96/ (100%)

Issues leading to actual complaint. In the survey instrument principals were prompted to cite reasons for the complaint in which they were involved. Table 25 is a summary of issues that lead to SPED complaints in which some principals were involved. Overall appropriateness of the IEP and failure to implement the student's IEP were the top 2 issues leading to formal parent complaints. These two areas ranked 1 and 2 respectively in both subcategories of high and no incidence. Respondents in the no incidence category indicated manifestation determination as the third leading issue involved in complaints. Evaluation and reevaluation of students were included by one respondent in each subcategory. Eight percent of principal respondents indicated a response of other, with 9% and 7% respectively in high and no incidence categories. Results suggest IEP compliance issues as the most frequent special education violation leading to formal special education complaints in which survey respondents have been involved.

Table 25

Reasons Cited for VDOE SPED Complaints by Principals Expressing Involvement

Complaint issue	#/% High incidence responses	#/% No incidence responses	#/% High and no incidence responses
Never Involved	26/ (60%)	25/ (57%)	51/ (57%)
Failure to implement IEP	5/ (12%)	4/ (9%)	9/ (10%)
Evaluation/ Re-Evaluation	1/ (2%)	1/ (2%)	2/ (5%)
Appropriateness of IEP	7/ (16%)	5/ (11%)	12/ (14%)
Prior Written Notice	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)	0/ (0%)
Manifestation Determination	0/ (0%)	4/ (9%)	4/ (5%)
Not Sure	0/ (0%)	2/ (5%)	2/ (2%)
Other	4/ (9%)	3/ (7%)	7/ (8%)
Total/% of combined	43/ (49%)	44/ (51%)	87/ (100%)

Perceived contributing factors of special education parent complaints. Table 26 illustrates contributing factors to special education formal complaints as perceived by respondents. The researcher used qualitative analysis to code and group responses of the open-ended question provided by respondents. High incidence principals cited timelines and compliance as the biggest factor leading to formal special education parent complaints. Respondents in the no incidence category indicated timelines and compliance as well as communication as the biggest contributing factor. Communication served as the largest discrepancy between the 2 groups with a 10% difference. Special education advocates were perceived as a factor by 9% of high incidence respondents, whereas respondents in the no incidence subcategory did not mention advocates as a contributing factor. Data suggest principals perceive regulation compliance and timeline violations as leading causes of parent complaints.

Table 26

Perceived Factors Leading to Complaints

Themes	#/ % High incidences	#/ % No incidences	#/ % Of high and no incidences
Timelines and compliance	14/ (25%)	10/ (26%)	24/ (26%)
Communication	9/ (16%)	10/ (26%)	19/ (20%)
Lack of teacher knowledge	10/ (18%)	5/ (13%)	15/ (16%)
Lack of parent knowledge	9/ (16%)	8/ (21%)	17/ (18%)
Parent retaliation	5/ (9%)	2/ (5%)	7/ (8%)
Advocates	5/ (9%)	0/ (0%)	5/ (5%)
Unknown	2/ (4%)	3/ (8%)	5/ (5%)
Other	1/ (2%)	0/ (0%)	1/ (1%)
Total/ % of combined	55/ (59%)	38/ (41%)	93/ (100%)

Chapter 4 presented data to answer the 5 research questions posed in the study. The use of these data created a snapshot of patterns and principals of the Commonwealth of Virginia in high and no incidences of formal parent complaints in special education. Several key findings emerged from analyzing data, which are each explored fully in chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education.

Research Questions

This study will address the following research questions:

1. What patterns emerge in principals' professional contexts in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
2. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of their special education knowledge in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
3. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of relevant professional development offered in the area of special education in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
4. What patterns emerge in coursework in college or university principal preparation programs in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?
5. What patterns emerge in principals' perceptions of factors contributing to parent complaints in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education?

Summary of Findings

After analyzing data gathered from participant surveys, the following themes emerged:

Finding 1. Principals in the category of no incidence divisions' had a higher percentage of degrees, teaching experience, and endorsements in the area of special education. No incidence respondents' data indicated an 11%, 16%, and 9% differential in the areas of degrees in special education, special education teaching experience, and special education endorsements respectively. Therefore, it seems that this background in special education experience may have provided principals in this no incidence subcategory with a stronger foundation in the area of special education. That said, overall, 82% of respondents did not have a degree in special education, and 81% did not have a special education endorsement.

Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell's (2006) study indicated over 90% of participating principals did not have a background in the area of special education. Participants with a background in special education in Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell's study indicated a high level of confidence when dealing with situations with students with disabilities, and were more apt to participate in special education issues in the building (2006). While Angelle and Bilton's (2009) study suggested that most principals lack field experience in the area of special education.

Finding 2. While there was not a statistical significance in assistant principal experience and responsibilities, principals and divisions with no incidences indicated stronger ownership of special education duties in their current roles. Respondents in high and no incidence categories indicated similar years of experience as assistant principal with the largest differential in the experience segments being 3%. High incidence principals reported a 12% higher rate of having some special education duties, while no incidence principals were 14% higher when responding as exclusively dealing with special education duties. Thus taking more ownership of special education responsibilities and duties in their building.

Lynch (2012) discussed the increased responsibility on principals with the implementation of IDEIA to ensure students with disabilities received individualized academic and socialized instruction in the least restrictive environment. A lack of principal leadership in special education mattered as a leading factor of dissatisfaction among teachers in Mueller, Singer, and Draper's 2008 study. Conversely, they also reported parent satisfaction when principals were able to communicate effectively during IEP meetings (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008). In 2001, an article from the National Association of Elementary Principals' expressed the importance of principals providing productive support for everyone involved with

the IEP process (NAEP, 2001). Administration support in special education is a driving force in creating a conducive learning environment for teachers and students (2001). Scheffel, Rude, and Boyle's (2005) study developed guiding principles divisions should adopt to maximize compliance and minimize complaints, with one such principle being the importance of principals taking an active role in getting parents to look at them as allies during the process. Many principals are overwhelmed and have appointed designees to handle special education duties (Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison-Wade, 2005).

Finding 3. Respondents in the high incidence category had a greater variation in their perceptions of their special education knowledge. High incidence respondents had a higher percentage of responses in the area of insufficient (4% compared to 0%) and exceptional (21% compared to 18%) perceived knowledge in the area of special education than respondents in the no incidence category. The expression of insufficient perceived special education knowledge from some principals in high incidence divisions' may indicate a lack of confidence when dealing with special education issues.

Hines (2001) and Rascoe's (2007) studies address the discrepancy between principals' self-perceptions of their knowledge in the area of special education, while having inadequate actual knowledge as determined by respondents inability to correctly answer scenario questions. Hines (2001) discussed the deficiencies of respondents related to their knowledge of IDEA mandates. Rascoe's (2007) concern was with a high percentage of principals' discrepancy between necessary and actual knowledge of special education to adequately perform their duties.

Findings 4. Information sources to keep current with special education trends were consistent between the two subcategories of divisions with two exceptions: attorney interaction and networking. A gap of seven percentage points appeared between principals from high and no incidence divisions (11% are of high incidence respondents compared to 4% respectively) who indicated the use of the school attorney as a source to keep abreast with best practices and trends in special education. This could be a result of necessity, stemming from the sheer presence and number of formal parent complaints filed by parents in high incidence divisions. The researcher also discovered a trend in responses in the "other" sources of information that can best be described as a difference in networking philosophies in the high and no incidence categories. Respondents in high incidence school divisions indicated internal,

intradivision networking, while respondents in no incidence school divisions indicated they utilized external, interdivision networking for sources of information.

Mueller, Singer, and Draper's (2008) study indicated the need to build new partnerships as a means of improving special education leadership. Divisions utilizing external networking and building partnerships maximize compliance by developing a support system for teachers and principals. This is a consistent finding based on no incidence school divisions exploring external networking partners.

Finding 5. Principals expressed comparable participation in and sources of relevant professional development in special education at some point in their careers, with principals from high incidence divisions potentially accessing more sources and sessions.

Overall 95% of respondents reported participation in relevant professional development at some point in their career, with 94% of high and 95% no incidence respectively. Respondents from both subcategories ranked sources of professional development in the following order: current school division, VDOE, previous school division, and other. High and no incidence division respondents mentioned the use of Training and Technical Assistance Center (T/TAC) as a source providing relevant professional development. Despite parallel percentages of relevant professional participation at some point in their careers, there was a discrepancy in the question related to participation in on-going, relevant professional development, with high incidence principals reporting a higher percentage of participation in ongoing relevant professional development compared to those in no incidence divisions. It is not determined in the study if this discrepancy in ongoing professional development participation is a product of mandated professional development based on a high rate of formal parent complaints.

According to Price and Wells (2013), superintendents viewed a lack of professional development is a reason for failure to implement IDEIA. Additionally, Shuran and Roblyer (2012) recommended district level training for administrators and teachers to reduce complaints. The inadequacy of quality principal preparation programs alone as a means of training effective principals was discussed in Hudley-Stukes's (2014) study, as a reason for school divisions to provide quality professional development in the area of special education. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell's (2006) study expressed the importance of school divisions providing relevant professional development related to current issues in the area special education to increase principal confidence in the area of special education. Milner (2006) found a

notable relationship between professional development and knowledge of IDEIA mandates, specifically with discipline issues.

Finding 6. There was no substantial gap between the number of courses taken related to legal issues in special education at the undergraduate, graduate, or principal preparation levels in either high or no incidence division subgroups; However, there was some gap at the post-principal preparation level. There was no substantial difference in number of courses completed at the undergraduate level, even with two high incidence respondents indicating completing 10 courses in legal aspects of special education. These two responses could be considered outliers or evidence of a misunderstood question, skewing the results in favor of high incidence category. In the area of principal preparation program courses, one high incidence respondent indicated completing six courses, which could also be considered an outlier. In the area of graduate level both subcategories reported 16% of respondents not taking a course in legal aspects. There were considerable findings in this area with both receiving a 1 for median and mode, while median was 1.2 and 1 respectively between high and no incidence respondents. No incidence respondents indicated taking more courses at the post principal preparation program levels (58% compared to 46%). High incidence division respondents completed a median of one course completed at the undergraduate, graduate, and principal preparation program level, while indicating a median of 0 courses completed post principal preparation program. No incidence division principals had a median score of 1 for all areas. Combined with data indicating more special education degrees, endorsements, and teaching experience for principals in no incidence divisions, these gaps in coursework experiences are not surprising.

Principals indicated in Lasky and Karge's (2006) study indicated a need for more coursework in special education while completing principal preparation programs, as participants expressed concern about their overall preparedness in leading the IEP process. On the other hand, Witt's (2003) study found preparation programs did an adequate job of preparing administrators and not important categories of special education. Witt's study indicated special education law was included in 11-25% and 50% of sampled preparation programs (2003). Lynch (2012) recommended six areas for inclusion in all administrator preparation programs that would produce administrators with a level of knowledge that will lead to successful instructional leadership in administrators in the area of special education.

Finding 7. Some principals have no formal preparation in the area of special education at the undergraduate, graduate, principal preparation level. Respondents indicated overall 36% did not take a course in special education trends and law at the undergraduate level, with 35% in high and 38% no incidence categories. At the graduate level these numbers dropped to 17% overall, 17% in high, and 18% no incidence categories not taking courses in special education. All three categories reported 16% of respondents not taking a special education course in special education at the principal preparation level.

Although the responsibility of the principal has increased, almost no state requires any training in special education for an individual to become licensed as a principal (Bateman & Bateman, 2001). As indicated by the 36% of respondents not taking a class at the undergraduate level, and 16% at the principal preparation program level principals are receiving endorsement to become principals without being introduced with training in the area of special education. Principals' lacking coursework in the area of special education was indicated in Angelle and Bilton, (2009) study. Leaving the burden of preparing principals to the local school division. Broyles (2004) indicated principals perceived they did not have adequate training in special education from principal preparations programs.

Finding 8. No substantial gap was found in principals' involvement in formal special education complaints, nor in their overall identification of factors leading to actual complaints in involved principals' perceptions. Overall, 29% of the respondents were involved in a formal parent complaint, with 31% in the high and 27% no incidence categories. Respondents in high incidence divisions commonly cited failure to implement and the appropriateness of IEP's as reasons for formal parent complaints in which they had been involved. Respondents in no incidence divisions cited manifestation determination violations (9%) as the leading reason for formal parent complaints in which they had been involved. Interestingly, manifestation determination violations were not mentioned at all by principals from high incidence divisions as a reason for their involvement in formal complaints.

Shuran and Roblyer (2012) reported 78% of complaints against school divisions were in the area of free appropriate public education. Lack of training and support lead to the majority of problems faced in school divisions, with poor relationships between parents and school officials is another important factor. Power's (2007) study reported due process violations as a reason for

formal complaints. Compliance issues were investigated and identified as a leading factor in parent complaints, according to Scheffel, Rude, and Boyle (2005).

Finding 9. Perceived factors leading to special education complaints varied between the two subgroups of principals. Considerable gaps were identified between the two subgroups of principals in the areas of communication and the involvement of advocates as reasons for formal parent complaints (9% compared to 0% respectively). Moderate gaps were identified in teacher and parent knowledge with high incidence divisions indicating a higher response rate in the area of lack of teacher knowledge (18% compared to 13% respectively). No incidence respondents identified lack of parent knowledge (21% compared to 16%) at a higher response of the calls for formal complaints. With a 10% differential, communication served as the biggest discrepancy between the two groups with a higher percentage of no incidence respondents indicating communication as a contributing factor to parent complaints.

Power (2007) indicated an increase in advocate agencies providing support and leading parents to file complaints. This is consistent with high incidence division respondents reporting advocates agencies as a reason for formal parent complaints. Shuran and Roblyer's (2012) study cited poor relationships and communication as a key factor leading to filed complaints. Communication during IEP meetings was discussed as an area of improvement for principals in Mueller, Singer, and Draper's (2008) study. Renty and Roeyers' (2006) study indicated communication as factor in complaints in the following areas: Disagreements about how to interpret requirements and lack of continue involvement with parents.

Implications

For Superintendents and division leadership

Implication 1. Superintendents and division leadership need to hire or develop leaders who have special education experience and credentials. According to finding 1, principals in no incidence school divisions had a higher number of special education degrees, teaching experience, and endorsements.

Implication 2. Superintendents and division leadership should also ensure that their principals take ownership and play an active role in special education matters and have them build capacity in their leadership teams. As indicated in finding 2, principals in no incidence

divisions took ownership by playing an active role in special education duties as shown by a higher percentage of being exclusively responsible for special education duties.

Implication 3. Central office administration should develop a plan to assess special education knowledge of principals while building capacity and increase confidence of principals in the area of special education. Division leadership plays an important role in providing support through sharing information to principals and parents, while building a parent-school bond (Renty and Roeyers, 2006). Finding 3 indicated high incidence principals had a higher percentage of insufficient and exceptional perceived knowledge related to special education.

Implication 4. Superintendents should evaluate the need for communication between attorney and principals and develop relevant professional development related to common themes in attorney/principal interactions in hopes of reducing redundant and expensive communication with attorneys. As reported in finding 4, high incidence principals specified a higher reliance on school attorney's as a source to stay current with special education trends.

Implication 5. Superintendents should also make it a priority to provide access to on-going relevant professional development for principals and continue to seek external partnerships to build capacity among their leadership and teaching staff. School divisions in higher incidence divisions reported a higher percentage of principals participating in on-going relevant professional development, while using an internal approach to sharing information. It was also determined in finding 5 that no incidence divisions successfully used external sources to obtain current special education information.

Implication 6. Division leaders should facilitate opportunities for principals to prepare for involvement in potential complaints, particularly in the areas of appropriate IEP implementation and manifestation determinations and share these lessons learned from complaint resolutions with leadership for future knowledge. . Data supporting finding 8 specified IEP implementation as the leading violation for respondents involved in a formal parent complaint.

Implication 7. Superintendents should also develop professional development and external community programs to bolster parent and teacher knowledge related to special education, while improving communication and fostering goodwill to create positive working relationships with advocates and challenging families. Finding 9 indicated varying perceptions

of factors leading to formal complaints between principals from high and no incidence school divisions, but the need to increase parent and teacher knowledge was evident in both. Principals from no incidence school divisions reported communication as the highest rated factor leading to parent complaints, while the participation of advocates was mentioned only by high incidence respondents.

For Principals

Implication 1. Principals should take an active role in special education matters in their building while expanding professional networking beyond their local school division to stay abreast of best practices and trends in special education. As indicated in finding 2, principals from no incidence school divisions reported an increase in dealing exclusively with special education duties.

Implication 2. Principals should continue to pursue coursework or professional development in legal matters related to special education to build skill sets beyond the basic requirements for teacher and principal licensure. This is very important based on finding 7 that some principals have not completed a course in legal trends in special education.

Implication 3. Principals should implement professional development and external community programs (ideally designed by division-level leadership and other key stakeholders) to bolster parent and teacher knowledge related to special education while improving communication and fostering goodwill with advocates and challenging families. As indicated in findings 4 and 5, principals depend on division leaders to provide relevant professional development. Principals from no incidence school divisions indicate the utilization of information sources external to the division to keep informed of changes in special education.

For higher education partners

Implication 1. Higher education programs should investigate the development of differentiated opportunities for career tracks and specialties, at the undergraduate and principal preparation levels in particular, related to special education. Some principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia have not taken any courses at the undergraduate, graduate, or principal preparation program level, as indicated in finding 7.

Implication 2. Principal preparation programs should consider adding a course in special education law in addition to the school law courses offered in most programs.

Developing additional courses dedicated to special education law should become a priority for principal preparation programs.

Implication 3. Representative from universities and colleges need to stay abreast of current issues in special education and develop courses to meet the need of principals and those who aspire to the principalship. The need for special education law courses being available beyond principal preparation programs was evident in finding 6, as almost half of the respondents had not completed course in legal aspects of special education beyond their principal preparation program.

For aspiring school leaders

Implication 1. Aspiring administrators should learn as much as possible about special education and intentionally carve out experiences in that arena to better prepare themselves for school leadership. They should continue to pursue coursework in legal matters related to special education to build skill sets beyond the basic requirements for teacher and principal licensure. While serving as assistant principals they should accept as many duties in the area of special education as possible, and when in the principalship, they should retain responsibility for the administration of special education programming, despite the temptation to delegate to make workloads lighter.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The researcher recommends the following opportunities for future studies to extend lessons learned in this investigation include:

1. A study comparing the differences in principal survey responses should be conducted after identifying high and no incidence of formal parent complaints at the school level.
2. A study to determine assistant principals' level of knowledge in the area of special education.
3. A study to determine the level of knowledge of directors of special education related to current special education issues.

4. A follow-up study to determine patterns in the number of courses taken in the area of special education law completed by principals involved in complaints.

Reflections

This study investigated the relationship between high and no incidence school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia in the area of formal parent complaints in the area of special education. The researcher used quantitative methodology to determine patterns of principals in these two categories to determine factors leading to complaints. Principals were asked to complete the 19-question survey and responses were analyzed to determine similarities and differences within the two subgroups.

The researcher expected substantial differences between principals in high and no incidence school divisions across variables. Findings of the study indicated principals in no incidence school divisions reported a higher level of background knowledge in the area special education based on a higher percentage of degrees, endorsements, and teaching experience in the area of special education. This finding was consistent with the researcher's hypothesis. The researcher also expected to find a major difference between the two groups of principals in the area of perceived special education knowledge. It was determined in this study that principals in high incidence divisions had a higher percentage of responses in the insufficient and exceptional categories of perceived special education knowledge. Respondents indicating exceptional perceived knowledge delete could exhibit overconfidence if lacking a solid foundation of background knowledge and special education when making critical decisions. Principals with perceived insufficient knowledge will lack confidence in making decisions in the area of special education, as this could be a result of inadequate principal preparation programs. The researcher found a noteworthy difference in factors perceived by principals leading to parent complaints in the area of communication with the no incidence principals placing a higher value in this area. While respondents of high incidence divisions mentioned advocates as a factor leading to complaints, it was not a response of no incidence principals. Another finding expected by the researcher was a lack of course offerings at the higher education levels. No incidence principals indicated an increased number of courses taken post principal preparation program.

The findings and implications documented in the study are noteworthy to school divisions throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. This study found a need for higher

education institutions (colleges and universities) to increase course offerings at the principal preparation level in the area of special education. Additionally there is a need for superintendents and division leadership to continue to develop and seek partnerships to deliver relevant ongoing professional development, as well as for principals to explore special education networking opportunities external to the division.

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Appendix A
Permission of Use

March 7, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

Kevin Newman has my permission to use questions and survey examples as published in my dissertation, *A Survey of Virginia Principals' Knowledge of Special Education Law*, defended in 2007. Mr. Newman has discussed various changes and has my full permission to implement them.

Sincerely,

Donna M. Power, Ph.D.

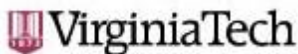
Appendix B

Training in Human Subjects Protection Certificate



Appendix C

IRB Approval Memo



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0969
email irb@ut.edu
website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 19, 2014
TO: Carol S. Cash, Ted S. Price, Kevin Darrell Newman
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Virginia Principals' Characteristics in Virginia School Divisions with High and No Incidences of Special Education Complaints
IRB NUMBER: 14-1167

Effective November 19, 2014, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M. Moore, approved the Amendment request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 2,4**
Protocol Approval Date: **November 18, 2014**
Protocol Expiration Date: **N/A**
Continuing Review Due Date*: **N/A**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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Appendix D
Invitation to Participate Letter

Dear Participant:

My name is Kevin Newman and I am a graduate student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. For my dissertation project, I am investigating patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education. Because you are a principal in the Commonwealth of Virginia, I am inviting you to participate in this research study by the completing the survey instrument at the included link.

The following survey will require approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. There is no compensation for responding nor is there any known risk. In order to ensure that all information will remain confidential please do not include your name. By completing this survey, informed consent is implied.

Thank you for taking your valuable time to complete the survey instrument and assisting me through the dissertation process. The data collected will assist in determining if principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia are prepared to lead in the area of special education. Again, by completing this survey, informed consent is implied.

Sincerely,

Kevin D. Newman

kevindn3@vt.edu

Appendix E

Survey

Principal characteristics in VA school divisions w/ high and no incidences of Special Ed complaints

The purpose of the study is to investigate patterns in principal characteristics (years of experience, perceived special education knowledge, principal preparation program, special education coursework, and perceptions of relevant professional development offered in special education) in school divisions with high incidences or no incidences of parent complaints for special education. The researcher will investigate if these characteristics have an effect on the rate of complaints filed against Virginia school divisions. Thank you for participating in our survey, as your feedback is important to us. There are 19 total questions, and estimated completion time is 15 minutes. Before beginning the survey, you may read this informed consent document to learn about your rights as a study participant. By participating and submitting the survey, your consent is implied.

1. In which division are you currently employed as a principal?

2. Indicate the grade level of your current school.
Elementary (PK-5 or K-5)
Middle (6-8)
High (9-12)
Other _____

3. How many years have you served in your current position as principal?
1-5 years
6-10 years
11-15 years
16-20 years
21-30 years
31+ years

4. Do you have a degree - at any level - in special education?
Yes
No

5. Do you hold any teaching endorsements in special education?
Yes
No

6. Have you taught as a special educator?
 Yes
 No
7. How many years did you serve as an assistant principal prior to becoming a principal?
 0 years
 1-5 years
 6-10 years
 11-15 years
 16-20 years
 21-30 years
 31+ years
8. While serving as an assistant principal, what best describes your duties related to special education?
 No role in special education duties
 Some role in special education duties
 Exclusively in charge of special education duties
9. In your current role as principal, what best describes your duties related to special education?
 No role in special education duties
 Some role in special education duties
 Exclusively in charge of special education duties
10. How would you rate your knowledge of legal issues in Special Education?
 Insufficient
 Sufficient
 Exceptional
11. How do you stay abreast of best practices and trends in legal issues surrounding special education? Check all that apply.
 Reading special education law reviews
 Reading about outcomes of court cases
 Division-provided professional development
 VDOE-provided professional development
 Privately-provided professional development
 Information from professional organizations
 Subscribing to listservs
 Interactions with school division lawyer
 Other _____

12. Have you participated in relevant professional development surrounding legal topics in special education at some point in your career?

Yes

No

13. Have you participated in relevant professional development surrounding legal topics in special education within the last 5 years?

Yes

No

14. Do you participate in relevant professional development surrounding legal topics in special education on an ongoing basis?

Yes

No

15. What organization(s) has/have provided you with RELEVANT professional development surrounding legal topics in special education - at any point in time? Check all that apply.

Local school division in which you are CURRENTLY employed

Local school division in which you were PREVIOUSLY employed

VDOE

Other _____

None. I have never received it.

16. Enter the number of courses that you have taken surrounding legal topics in special education in each text box, even if zero. (Check marks will automatically appear in boxes)

At the undergraduate level? _____

At the graduate level? _____

During your principal preparation program? _____

Since completing your principal preparation program (do not count your principal prep program, but rather include doctoral work, classes taken for recertification/your own professional development, etc.)? _____

17. Have you ever been involved in a formal VDOE special education complaint filed by a parent during your time as an assistant principal or principal?

Yes

No

Unsure

18. If you have ever been involved in a formal VDOE special education complaint filed by a parent during your time as an assistant principal or principal, what was the nature of the complaint? Check all that apply.

N/A - I have never been involved in a formal VDOE special education complaint

Failure to implement the IEP

Evaluation/reevaluation

Appropriateness of IEP

Prior written notice of proposed or refused action

Manifestation determination meeting

Not sure

Other _____

19. What factors do you believe contribute to formal parent complaints in special education in your school division?