



SAVE our Special Education Teachers

10 things you can do as a principal to keep great sped teachers

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction,
Closing the Gap*

It's widely realized special education teachers are leaving the profession in droves. They are feeling overburdened, isolated, and unprepared. We need to save special education teachers, and principals have one of the most important and influential pieces of this complex puzzle. You set the tone for the school and your staff around special education.

I work at a school where my principal, Paul Anders, and assistant principal

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Annette Pasquariello, taught me best practices in supporting special education teachers. They make the job doable and make changes that keep us in the job. Here are 10 best practices I learned from them that principals can do to help support their special education teachers.

1. Build Relationships. Help your special education teacher become a vital part of your school. Bring their expertise to the table, help them feel useful and form relationships with other staff members. We feel isolated and alone many times and need to have a support network. In addition

to building relationships within the school, we also need a cohort of special education teachers. Teachers learn best from other teachers and need to be given the time and the place to do so.

2. Placement of Classrooms. Think about where your special education classrooms are located. Are they a part of your school? Do they meet the needs of the students and the teachers? One way to find out is to ask your teachers.

3. Lunches and Breaks. Do you know if your special education teachers are getting a duty free planning and lunch? Ask — you may be surprised to find out many are not. It is absolutely necessary teachers have breaks, we interact with other staff, and we have time to take a breath. Many of us feel it's our duty to cover what is needed, but that's where burnout starts.

4. School-Wide Planning. Having special education representation on your planning committee for assemblies, school functions, fire drills, and class scheduling is key. A myriad of accommodations and modifications need to be considered and taken into account for all kids to be integrated successfully, which is what we strive for each day. For everything the school does, the question should be asked, "Does this work for all students?" If it doesn't, what changes need to be made?

5. Paraeducators. Having administration on top of filling for open para positions is so important. Human Resources moves at their own speed, but it's vital to keep your teachers in the loop on when the positions are posted, will close, and to set up interviews as quickly as possible. By doing this, you make your teachers feel important and supported.

6. Know the Kids. My principal and assistant principals are in my room weekly, if not daily. They know each

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of my students in-depth. My students are greeted by name in the hallway and given high fives. It makes my kids and I feel a part of the school, and that we matter. It also models for other staff and students how to interact with my kids and what is expected.

7. Training. It is hard to find good trainings. Principals could be wonderful advocates to help us find these trainings, especially for our new special education teachers. We need to be given the tools to succeed both academically and behaviorally.

8. Communication. The number one thing my administration does that makes me feel the most supported is ask two important questions: "What do you need?" and "How can I help?" Doing this opens the door to let them know if I have a need, but more importantly it lets me know I have back up, I'm not alone, and they are there to support me.

9. Paperwork. This is the bane of all special education teachers. It is what chases people from the profession. Coming up with ways to sneak in extra work time for your special education teachers to work on IEPs, FBAs, BIPs, evaluations.... they will truly love you for it. Could you hire a sub once a month to help cover IEP meetings so teachers don't have to be held after and before school? Are there meetings they could be excused from?

10. Integration. Make it the norm that ALL kids are our kids! Help integrate special education kids

into every part of the school day. Think about how to build in more support to help them be successful with their general education peers. Lunch groups, recess buddies, reading friends, peer mentors...there are tons of ways.

My school is known as being one of the best and most inclusive in the area; this is directly related to the support and leadership of my principals. You are truly the key to how special education teachers and students are looked at and treated within your school. Take a hard look at your school. Are you doing everything you can do to help? Is there one of these 10 things you could start doing tomorrow that may help save a special education teacher? These teachers got into the profession because they have a passion for it — help them keep that passion alive.

There are frequent discussions about how to attract special education teachers to the profession. We need to change the focus into trying to retain the teachers we already have. This would ensure the population of students who need them the most would have highly-trained, veteran teachers.

The most important thing you need to do right now: Go ask your special education teachers how they are doing. Ask them what they need. Ask them what they are missing. You have the power to change their lives. Choose retention over recruitment! ■

To hear more from Melissa, watch our video with her featuring Washington Middle School's Peer Mentor program at <http://bit.ly/wms-peer-mentor>.