

Principals' perspectives in determining the least restrictive environment for students with  
disabilities in rural Northwestern Pennsylvania schools

\*

A Dissertation

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of Special Education

Slippery Rock University

Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctorate of Special Education

---

By

Mr. Brandon M. Maines

Bachelor of Science in Education, Lock Haven University of PA, 2003  
Master of Science in Education–Teaching and Learning, Lock Haven University of PA, 2006  
Master of Science in Education – Educational Administration, Edinboro University of PA, 2007  
Doctor of Education – Special Education, Slippery Rock University of PA, 2021

Table of Contents

Signature Page

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

- A. Historical Perspective
- B. Statement of the Problem
- C. Significance of the Study
- D. Delimitations
- E. Assumptions
- F. Definition of Terms
- G. Conclusions

II. Review of Literature

- A. Purpose of the Study
- B. Research Questions
- C. Need for the Study
- D. Legal Impacts
- E. Outline of Major Court Cases that Shaped Special Education Law
- F. Least Restrictive Environment
- G. Educational Leadership of Principal's in Special Education

H. Principal's Role in Mainstreaming/Inclusion

I. Developing a Systematic Program that Covers a Continuum of Services

J. Principal's Leading Special Education

K. Summary

### III. Methodology

A. Action Plan: Intervention

B. Data Collection

C. Timeline

D. Data Analysis

E. Presentation of Results

F. Limitations

G. Summary

### IV. Results of the Study

A. Demographics

B. Attitudes Toward Inclusion

C. Hypothetical Questions in Determining Least Restrictive Environment

D. Interview Questions

E. Summary

### V. Discussion

A. Summary of Findings

B. Limitations

C. Recommendations for Future Studies

D. Conclusion

References

Appendix A: Survey

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Appendix C: IRB Approval

**SIGNATURE PAGE**

Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Special Education

A Dissertation Written By

Mr. Brandon M. Maines

Bachelor of Science in Education, Lock Haven University of PA, 2003  
Master of Science in Education–Teaching and Learning, Lock Haven University of PA, 2006  
Master of Science in Education – Educational Administration, Edinboro University of PA, 2007  
Doctor of Education – Special Education, Slippery Rock University of PA, 2021

Approved by

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Title Associate Professor of Special Education  
Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey, Dissertation Chair

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Title Assistant Professor - Special Education  
Dr. Anne Rose, Dissertation Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Title Professor, Dept. of Special Education and Disability Policy Studies, Clarion University of PA  
Dr. Amy Love, Dissertation Committee Member

Accepted by

  
\_\_\_\_\_, Dean College of Education,  
Dr. Keith Dils Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

**ABSTRACT**

This research was conducted to determine the perspectives of principals in determining the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. When principals are placed into the role of Local Education Agency (LEA) they are part of the decision-making process for determining the least restrictive environment (LRE) for individuals with disabilities in their schools. This research focused on the perceptions and attitudes that the principals have as it relates to special education. The research utilized a two-part investigation. For the first part, principals were asked to answer questions related to demographic data and educational experiences. Then, were asked a series of questions related to their attitudes toward inclusionary practices. Principals were then asked several hypothetical questions related to determining the LRE for students with disabilities. In the second part of the research, participants engaged in a face to face virtual interview that asked a series of questions related to their role as the LEA in their school and the perspectives that each principal had in relations to determining the LRE for students with disabilities. The results of the research indicated that principals lack the fundamental capacity to fully understand special education and its implications. The research showed an overwhelming need for in-depth professional development in the area of special education for principals as it relates to leading their schools and special education population. The need to build capacity to lead initiatives such as inclusion within their school is imperative in moving forward to ensure that individuals with special needs are educated in the LRE.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**“The greatest challenge in life is discovering who you are. The second greatest is being happy with what you find” *Oscar Auliq-Ice***

Challenges are always mountains in the distance that people struggle to even approach. Approaching the mountain and making the decision to begin is the ultimate test of one's inner strength. Continuing on that journey, overcoming obstacles, misfortunes and mind games just makes one stronger. I personally thank God for guiding me on this journey through life and finally being able to be me!

Thank You, Dr. Ashlee Rineer-Hershey, for all of your valuable and insightful guidance throughout this process. Your encouragement and uplifting spirits along with your ability to challenge me when I needed it goes without solitude. I must also thank the members of my committee. Dr. Amy Love, your swift nature and class gave me the needed drive to ensure my overall success in this process. Dr. Anne Rose, your intellectual guidance and feedback during this journey was invaluable.

To my partner, Donnie Rice thank you for your patience and love during this specific time in our lives. Thank you for your understanding and always being there when I needed a break or just needed someone to talk to.

To Dr. Cybill Reed, your friendship and intellect was appreciated throughout this entire journey. The phone calls and assistance that you provided is a debt that I will never ever be able to repay.

To my friends, your encouragement and friendship goes beyond what anyone would ever expect. I wish each and every person in this world had a friendship circle like us, that lasts for forever.

To my most amazingly beautiful children, Maxwell and Molly, you give me the strength to keep going day to day and work so hard for your happiness. My love for you goes beyond every mountain and valley. You are my world!!!

Lastly, this work is dedicated to my parents Frankie and Bonnie Maines. Your ability to raise me and challenge me, but also allowing me to be me is something that I struggle to find the words to express. A day does not go by where I am so proud that you are my mom and dad! You are the very best!

## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The success of any institution can be linked to leaders such as Bill Gates, Mike Bloomberg and Jeff Bezos who set the stage for success. The area of education is no different. School leaders set the tone and vision for the overall success of the school program. In 2001, George W. Bush enacted the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The NCLB law – which grew out of concern that the American education system was no longer internationally competitive – significantly increased the federal role in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students. It put a special focus on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education, and poor and minority children, whose achievement, on average, trails their peers (Klein, 2020). This law placed much more emphasis on the local leaders and the decisions that they make in reference to all students, but specifically students in special groups, including students with special needs. The NCLB act is one of the first laws that focused on achievement with students with special needs.

School leadership in the role of the principal is vital to ensuring that students with special needs are included in the overall educational system in their least restrictive environment. Designing a program that meets their specific and unique needs and making decisions on where the child with a disability will be placed falls on the school leaders within the school. Prior to NCLB, school leaders were considered managers of the school. Their daily duties included managing the students and staff and ensuring each and every day was successful. Now, their leadership is critical to the overall success of the school. In the past, school principals did not have to engage with students with disabilities. The principal needs to be familiar with the

concept and practice of special education (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). Now, the principal's role in determining the best program for the child with a disability is an everyday part of their position. Because this role has become more focused on special education, it is critical to understand how principals make the determination of where to educate a student with a disability and their attitudes toward including students with disabilities in the regular education environment.

Often decisions and options for students with special needs are limited in rural school districts where the overall student population is low. Principals are tasked with providing the highest quality of education with lowest amount of resources available. By determining the factors that principals utilize when making decisions on placement of students in the least restrictive environment, it will assist in providing guidance on professional development needs and a more structured way of making determinations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Principals are tasked with many duties throughout their school day - from ensuring the safety of all students to the day to day tasks to make any school run smoothly. Many principals come to the job with a huge skill set that qualifies them to be the best leader to run the school. While many of those skills are set and necessary, few principals have a large skill set in the area of special education.

In Pennsylvania, the law requires that a representative from the school district that can offer resources be a member of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team, this often is the principal of the school. This representative is considered to be the Local Education Agency (LEA). The LEA is a person identified within the local school district that is able to allocate resources to ensure that the overall needs of students are met. While most school districts have a

special education director, that position is overwhelmed with the sheer number of students requiring special education services that it is impossible to be at every IEP meeting. Thus, the principal becomes the person responsible for ensuring the best education possible for students with disabilities. The principal also ensures that the services that are necessary in the IEP are done in the least restrictive environment (LRE)

Many school principals lack the necessary skills and mindset to ensure that all services are done in the LRE and have very different attitudes and perspectives that guide their decision-making when making these determinations. Being in a rural area in Northwestern Pennsylvania, the lack of resources available makes these determinations much more difficult. Each principal has his/her own unique factors in making the determination for least restrictive environment thus creating the problem in ensuring the best education is achieved for each and every student with a disability.

While principals utilize their own backgrounds and knowledge base to make decisions for students with disabilities, no one principal does it the same across school districts. Often, principals within a school have similar determining factors that lead to their decisions and guidance in IEP meetings, but the LRE should be very similar across all school districts.

Chapter 14 of the Pennsylvania school code provides guidance to all school districts that they must have a continuum of services to meet the needs of all students. The guidance shows there are 14 areas of special education for which a school district must be able to provide services. The law sets this continuum for all schools. Schools utilize this parameter to set their individual programs. The services that they provide are accomplished in many different ways.

When making the determination of an educational program for a student with disabilities there are several legal implications in making that decision. School districts propose an

educational program that meets the child’s needs in the least restrictive environment. If this placement is incorrect, then a parent is able to file a due process claim against the school district. Due process is a formal way to resolve disputes between parents and the school. These most like include hearing officers and council representation. The law clearly states that it is the educational professional’s duty to ensure that the student is educated in the least restrictive environment, not the parents; duty. As school districts are tasked with this challenge it is often the principals, who often have very little experience in special education law, who make these decisions for students with disabilities. The lack of uniformity can also cause distress among students who are transient due to different services that are offered in different ways at different districts.

In the last several years there has been an uptick in the number of due process cases that have been brought to school districts. Many of the lawsuits are due to the school districts not providing educational services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

While this problem continues to raise questions in the community, the areas within this study are very rural and many contain high poverty rates. The following chart shows the percentages of students with free and reduced lunch in each of the school districts. The state median level is 42%.

**Table 1**

***Free and Reduced Lunch Percentages by District***

<b>School District</b>	<b>Percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch</b>
District A	52%
District B	39%

District C	61%
District D	79%
District E	44%
District F	44%
District G	52%
District H	41%

It is assumed that the principals that service the school districts within this study have very limited knowledge of special education law and the factors that can and do lead to due process claims against the district. The lack of educational background is presumed to be very high for principals and assistant principals within this study. Many of the principals and assistant principals learn on the job, which is very dangerous and opens the schools up to very costly litigation for students with special needs.

Through evaluation of the existing research, various sources point to principals not having a conceptual understanding of laws and the governing of those laws for students with special needs. Examination of the history of least restrictive environment and overall progress of the laws that govern special education shows that the role of the building principal has recently evolved since the onset of the NCLB Act. A principal's overall involvement in the role of special education leader has only occurred in the last 20 years. Thus, creating the vacuum of principals that do not possess the background knowledge necessary to effectively lead special education. Their limited knowledge comes from on the job experiences, minimal professional development, and by their own personal research.

With the lack of fundamental knowledge this research was designed to obtain a better understanding of the key concepts and ways that principals determine the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities in their respective buildings and districts. Also, understanding how their attitudes towards the special education population is critical to the overall design of this investigation. By combining the determining factors that leaders utilize in determining educational placement with their overall attitudes towards the special education population in their schools, the contribution of the research will show the needs in this area for the future. The focus of the research will be around two main research questions:

1. What are the determining factors that principals utilize when making least restrictive environment determinations for students with disabilities?
2. What are the attitudes of principals and assistant principals towards inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom?

The overview of this study utilizes a qualitative study using mixed methods. Due to the large geographic area that the school districts cover it was determined that the use of an online survey would be best to try to capture as many school principals and assistant principals that were within the study. However, including the paper and pencil survey allows for individuals who do not prefer, or trust, online data collection to partake in the study. To follow up on the survey, the face to face interview was selected to give the interviewee the opportunity to express him or herself about his/her true perspectives on special education.

### **Significance of Study**

Much of the existing research conducted shows that principals lack the fundamental understanding of special education and the laws the surround it. Review of the current and existing research indicates there was zero evidence of research conducted in rural Northwestern

Pennsylvania that focused on the determining factors and principals' attitudes toward educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

By gaining a comprehensive understanding of the determining factors and attitudes that principals employ when making special education decisions, this research study could provide guidance for future professional development in this area. The local intermediate unit provides professional development monthly to the principals within their geographic area. The results of this study could guide the professional development team at the intermediate unit in the development of a comprehensive special education program designed to help principals and assistant principals gain a better knowledge base in the area of special education. Furthermore, the results of this study could provide local information to the school districts for future professional development guidance for their administration. Finally, the results of this study could assist local and state university principal preparation programs to ensure that they are providing a comprehensive special education part to their preparatory programs.

### **Delimitations**

The limitations of this study are that the study is based upon the honesty and fidelity of the survey and interview subjective responses of the administrators surveyed and interviewed. At times, the questions within this study can create instability when faced with questions that may appear to be negative toward a particular principal or the district that they serve. Another limitation of the study is that due to the study being conducted across several school districts each school district has very different systems in place to service students with special needs. Some of the schools within the focus of the study utilize the local intermediate unit's consortium classrooms to service students with the most complex needs, while other schools service these students within their own programs due to the lower numbers of students enrolled in a particular

disability category. Consortium classrooms are developed and implemented by the local intermediate unit to assist schools with low enrollment within a category. These classrooms are spread throughout the districts serviced by the intermediate unit. Local school districts can utilize these consortium classrooms housed in different districts to meet the unique needs of the students that they serve.

This study was limited to Northwestern Pennsylvania and may not represent other areas in Pennsylvania or outside of the state. Also, the limitations of total school enrollment are indicative of the nature of the special education programs that they serve. Being that this study is in Northwestern Pennsylvania, a school district in a similar district, with enrollment the same, in another part of Pennsylvania may not show the same results.

### **Assumptions**

The special education law is very complex and comprehensive. Elementary and secondary principals do not have a fundamental base of special education law. This lack of fundamental knowledge can lead to misinterpretations of the law that could misguide principals in making the decisions for educational placement incorrectly. Understanding LRE along with interventions, adaptations and modifications can also influence a principal's decision when determining educational placement. Principals need to have a thorough understanding of how special education functions within a school. This functioning has an overall impact on general education, student placement, master scheduling, personnel, resources, and the overall operation of the school building.

Being in the rural areas of Northwestern Pennsylvania, the socioeconomic status of the schools is very low. These areas lack resources and industry to increase the median income levels of the households. Rooted in farming, much of the industry is not modernized and leads to

higher poverty levels within each of the school districts. Many of the schools have limited resources - both physical and financial resources - in order to meet the students' needs in the LRE. Therefore, with the lack of resources, understanding and meeting the needs of the students becomes very difficult when trying to adhere to the laws surrounding special education.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* – IDEA defines LRE in two prongs: (1) To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; (2) Special classes, separate schools, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Sec. 300.114 LRE requirements, 2017).

*Mainstreaming* – students with disabilities are placed in the regular education classroom for part of the school day (US Legal, 2019).

*Inclusion* – secures opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers in the general education classroom (Your Dictionary, 2020)

*Special Education* – a form of learning provided to students with exceptional needs, such as students with learning disabilities or other challenges

*School leader* – means a principal, assistant principal, building administrator or other individual who is (a) an employee or officer of an elementary school or secondary school, local educational agency, or other entity operating an elementary school or secondary school, and (b) responsible

for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operation in the elementary school or secondary school building (ESSA, 2015)

*Local Education Agency (LEA)* – As defined by ESEA, a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a state for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state, or for a combination of school districts or counties that is recognized in a state as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d)

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP)* – a written plan for the provision of services for the education of students who are disabled or gifted (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020)

*Disability* – a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity (ADA National Network, 2020)

*Educational Placement* – the overall instructional setting in which the students receives their education including the special education and related services provided (Law Insider, n.d.)

*Professional Development* – a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill and effectiveness (Great School Partnerships, 2013)

*General Education* – the program of education that typically developing children should receive, based on state standards and evaluated by the annual state educational standards test (Webster, 2019)

### **Conclusion**

Investigating the nature of the principal's perspectives in determining the least restrictive environment is essential in determining the need for professional development. Understanding how each of the principals in these rural school make determinations for students when being placed in the LEA role. By ensuring that the principals understand the process, and can make educated decisions, is essential in preserving the integrity of education for all students with disabilities in the rural counties in Northwestern Pennsylvania and across the country.

## CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

### Purpose of the Study

For years, the idea of special education and the location in which those services are provided have been widely controversial topic of debate. Through various challenges and changes, the world of special education has and continues to be dramatically transformed. One aspect of this transformation is the idea of where special education services are to be delivered. The historical context of the transformation along with recent case studies has proven that there continues to be very biased opinions on where to best service individuals with disabilities. Special education supports and services and the related services that often accompany special education vary from state to state. What one student may receive in one state is not necessarily what that student will receive in another state. This is due to the overwhelming different interpretations of the laws that govern the country relating to special education, and the individual state laws that surround special education. In Pennsylvania, Chapter 14 of the Pennsylvania School Code of 1949 regulations govern the oversight of special education services and how those services impact children with disabilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. Section 1400 et seq.) requires that each LEA to make available a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the LRE and provide a continuum of placement alternatives for children with disabilities (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2001). Regulations call for LEA's to ensure that the needs of the students with disabilities are met in the LRE. The IDEA 2004 identifies the LEA representative as someone who;

(i) is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities;

(ii) is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and

(iii) is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency.

(34 CFR 300.321(a)(4))

(Parker, n.d.)

The LEA representative is a very important role and is a required member of the IEP team. (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, 2018). In rural Northwestern Pennsylvania, the financial resources are often stretched very thin and, all too often, principals fulfill the role of the LEA in IEP meetings. Principals have the authority, as the law states, to expedite each of the three criteria. The issue arises when principals do not have the background knowledge in special education and are called upon to make decisions that clearly impact the child and the child's right to a free and appropriate public education.

The purpose of this study is to examine the determining factors that principals utilize when making decisions regarding placement of students in their least restrictive environment. Inclusion of students with disabilities have also transformed over the years, and more and more students with disabilities are being educated among their general education peers. Principals that serve as LEAs have to be the driver of inclusion. Inclusion implies the presumption of placement in the regular education classroom with children without disabilities (Thompson, 2015). The attitudes of principals who serve as LEA in IEP meetings can impact the educational placement of students. This research will also examine the attitudes that principals possess in making placement decisions for students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the determining factors that principals utilize when making least restrictive environment determinations for students with disabilities?

2. What are the attitudes of principals and assistant principals towards inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom?

### **Need for the Study**

Rural Northwestern Pennsylvania contains several school districts that serve students from low socio-economic homes. This research examines the perspectives of principals from seven rural school districts in counties in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Recently there has been an increase in the number of legal claims that these districts are facing. The use of LEAs with limited background knowledge in special education could have an impact on the likelihood that the school district will be facing litigation. The impact of the rural areas and the use of principals in the role of special education LEA is essential in determining whether school districts should utilize principals in determining special education services for students with disabilities. Understanding the background training, knowledge of special education law and the attitudes of the principals in making decisions regarding the least restrictive environment is needed to determine how educational placement decisions are made.

### **Legal Impacts**

Prior to the 1950s, individuals with disabilities were either segregated, institutionalized, or remained at home for their education. Early special education laws were created to remedy this exclusion (Carson, 2015). Two landmark court cases set the stage for transformation in the way in which individuals with disabilities are educated in the public-school system. The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ultimately sparked the desegregation of students with disabilities (McGovern, 2015). Although the decision specifically concerned segregation based on race, it highlighted the importance of providing an equal education to all students including those with disabilities (Prager, 2014).

In the early 1970's, in a response to *Brown v. Board of Education* the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) brought a class action law suit against the state of Pennsylvania (Taylor, 2004). This group represented thirteen children with an intellectually disability who had been excluded from Pennsylvania's public schools. These students were considered to be uneducable and untrainable (Prager, 2014). Then, in the *Mills v. Board of Education*, a class action lawsuit similar to *PARC v. Pennsylvania* brought action based on the denial of public education to children who were classified as intellectually disabled, hyperactive, or emotionally disturbed (Prager, 2014).

The *PARC* and *Mills* class action suits' outcomes only were truly pertinent in Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia, they were the catalysts to the desegregation of students with disabilities in all public schools. Recognizing the need for legislation that protects the right to education for children with disabilities, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 also known as PL 94-142 (McGovern, 2004). This act was the legislative law that set the stage for the implementation of the LRE consideration when determining where to educate students with disabilities (Aquarian, 2013). According to PL 94-142, students with disabilities from ages 5-21 are required to be educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible regardless of the nature and severity of their disabilities. (Alquraini, 2013). PL 94-142 was designed to guarantee access to public education by offering federal funding to states that established policies to assure that all children with disabilities were given access to a free and appropriate public education, this term is also known as FAPE. Furthermore, it required that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment appropriate to fit the needs of each individual student (McGovern, 2015).

In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act legislation was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act which is the federal law that governs the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities in the USA. The key amendment changed the term “mainstreaming” of individuals with disabilities into the general education environment to the term “inclusion” (Alquraini, 2013). In 2001, the United States government enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The key provision of this act was to expand the role of the federal government beyond just providing federal monies to states, to also holding the states accountable by mandating standards and sanctions for states who do not set the criteria (Prager, 2014). This act also reaffirmed that individuals with disabilities were also expected to achieve and make progress according to their individual goals under FAPE. In 2015, NCLB was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ESSA contained many of the same components of NCLB but focused on accountability plans and accountability goals for all students (Yell, 2019). Finally, in 2017, a major supreme court decision changed language regarding students with disabilities. In *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* Chief Justice John Roberts wrote,

When all is said and done, a student offered an educational program providing “merely more than de minimis” progress from year to year can hardly be said to have been offered an education at all. For children with disabilities, receiving instruction that aims so low would be tantamount to “sitting idly . . . awaiting the time they were old enough to drop out.” The IDEA demands more. It requires an educational program reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances.

(Yell, 2019, p. 57)

**Outline of Major Court Cases that Shaped Special Education Law**

Over the last 70 years, individuals with disabilities have overcome many obstacles from segregation to inclusion. These events and laws have developed and continue to take shape, as recent as 2017 with *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District*. These impacts have given students with disabilities more and more rights, especially when it comes to receiving their education in the least restrictive environment. The following table outlines major milestones for individuals with disabilities.

**Table 2**

***Timeline of Events Impacting Special Education***

<b>Date</b>	<b>Milestones</b>	<b>Results impacting LRE</b>
1954	<i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i>	Highlighted the importance of providing and equal education to all students – including students with disabilities (Prager, 2014)
1965	Elementary and Secondary Education Act	Authorized funds for professional development, instructional materials, resources to support educational programs, and the promotion of parental involvement (Casalaspì, 2017)
1966	Title VI added to Elementary and Secondary Education Act	Stated that no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or nation origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (Casalaspì, 2017)
1972	<i>Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania</i>	The first right to education suit in the country and secured education for all students (McGovern, 2015)
1972	<i>Mills v. Board of Education</i>	Ruled that no child eligible for a publicly supported education in the District of Columbia public schools shall be excluded

		<p>from a regular public-school assignment unless adequate alternative educational services suited to the child's needs and a constitutionally adequate prior hearing and periodic review of the child's status, progress, and the adequacy of any educational alternative are provided (McGovern, 2015)</p>
1973	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act	<p>Stated that no otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States—shall solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program—receiving Federal financial assistance (Moore, 1979)</p>
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975	<p>-Guaranteed access to public education by offering federal funding to states that established policies to assure that all children with disabilities were given access to a free and appropriate public education (McGovern, 2015)</p> <p>-Stated that “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...[should be] educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Brock, 2018)</p>
1982	<i>Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley</i>	<p>Defined “appropriate education” as “personalized instruction with sufficient support services to permit the child to benefit educationally from that instruction” (McGovern, 2015)</p>
1983	<i>Roncker v. Walter</i>	<p>Developed a two-part test to determine placement for students with disabilities</p>

---

		(Garrison-Wade, 2005)
1987	The Regular Education Initiative	Encouraged both regular and special education personnel to work together more effectively to provide the best education possible for all children, by adapting the regular education environment to better accommodate the student's needs (Whitworth, 1994)
1990	Public Law 94-142 is renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	Mandates that students with disabilities should only be placed in separate classes or schools when the nature or severity of their disabilities is such that they could not receive and appropriate level of education in a general education classroom with supplementary aides and services  Replaces the term mainstreaming with inclusion (Alquaraini, 2013)
1990	Americans with Disabilities (ADA)	Civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public  Its purpose is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else (ADA National Network, 2020)
1991	<i>Greer v. Rome City School District</i>	The court decided in favor of parents who objected to the placement of their daughter in a self-contained special education classroom (Garrison-Wade, 2005)
1993	<i>Oberti v. Clementon School District</i>	Changed from IDEA's "mainstreaming" approach to the concept of "inclusion" (Garrison-Wade, 2005)
1994	<i>Sacramento City Unified School District v. Holland</i>	Challenged the district on placement of a student and ruled when determining placement, mainstreaming a student with disabilities in regular education classes with

		<p>supplemental aids and services must first be considered prior to placement in a special education classroom (Garrison-Wade, 2005)</p>
2001	No Child Left Behind	<p>Required that students with disabilities must participate in all state and district-wide assessments, have access to the general education curriculum, and receive their instruction from highly qualified special and general education teachers (Sumbera, Pazey &amp; Lashley, 2014)</p>
2004	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act	<p>Strongly emphasized a preference for placement in general education classrooms, stating that “the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible” (Brock, 2018)</p>
2006	<i>J.L. v. Mercer Island School District</i>	<p>Clarified IDEA’s main requirement of FAPE by tying a student’s IEP goals and subsequent efforts to support such goals to the provision of FAPE, stressing that school must provide a <i>meaningful</i> education to students with disabilities</p> <p>Mandated that the students IEP must be “reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits” (Sumbera, Pazey &amp; Lashley, 2014)</p>
2007	<i>Winkelman v. Parma</i>	<p>Mandated parental involvement in the Individualized Education Program process</p> <p>Guaranteed the rights of both children with disabilities and their parents</p> <p>Explained that parents must be involved in the process of providing a student with a disability FAPE (Zagona, Miller, Kurth &amp; Love, 2019)</p>

2015	Every Student Succeeds Act replaces No Child Left Behind	Call for quality teaching and encouragement of inclusive education (Alsarawi, 2019)
2017	<i>Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District</i>	It requires an educational program reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances (Yell, 2019)

### **Least Restrictive Environment**

Since the late 1960s up through the early 1990s and even now, the concept of the least restrictive environment (LRE) has guided the design of services for people with disabilities. The LRE principle has been incorporated into federal and state policies and has been widely accepted by professionals in the field (Taylor, 2004). By understanding and determining the best placement of students with disabilities, the term sets the standard for ensuring that students are educated in the best possible location with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible.

As the courts have redefined education from *Brown v. Board* to *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, the interpretation of LRE continues to be a very gray area that is set for interpretation. LRE was defined in IDEA and reads:

Each public agency must ensure that – (i) [t]o the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and (ii) [s]pecial classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Carson, 2015).

Often times, schools have to make decisions regarding the placement of individuals with disabilities and make those decisions for the wrong reasons. Cramer (2015) explains that placement decisions should not be based on severity of disability, disability label, availability of educational or related services within a particular setting, availability of space, or administrative suitability. These are all illegitimate reasons for choosing placement. As these decisions are all considered illegitimate, there continues to be several interpretations of LRE and various guiding decisions that are utilized when determining the best place to educate students. Finding and utilizing a common tool for determining LRE continues to be a struggle.

The theoretical frameworks established through the Council for Exceptional Children (2020) assisted in the development of the LRE/Achievement at a Glance tool. This tool consists of nine educational domains. When used, this tool is considered to provide a “picture” of the programs, services, and learner outcomes of students with disabilities at a particular school. Cramer (2015) studied the use of this tool and as a result it was determined that when utilizing the tool to make educational placement decisions there was a statistically significant increase in both the inclusion rate and the average amount of time that students with disabilities spend with their non-disabled peers.

Kurth et al. (2019), conducted a study that focused on the statements within students' IEPs that determined the educational placement decisions. The study coded out terms associated with 88 students with disabilities. Its purpose was to understand what factors IEP teams document when making LRE decisions, and to describe the general education classes or activities in which students with disabilities participate. One of the key factors that resulted from the study was that within IEPs, the teams identified many factors that justified a student's removal from general education settings.

How school districts determine the LRE for students continues to be very haphazard, and often individuals such as principals have very limited knowledge of the laws. How these LRE considerations factor into placement choices affects special education decision making (Carson, 2016). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 makes principals responsible for providing students with disabilities FAPE in the LRE, as delineated in the student's IEP (Sumbera et al., 2014). The administrative representative of the LEA who is often the principal, must be able and willing to allocate the resources necessary for the provision of FAPE and LRE (Prager, 2014). How the principal constructs his or her interpretation of *appropriate* can have a significant impact on the outcome of a child's IEP – a legal document that represents “the embodiment of a student's FAPE” in the LRE (Sumbera et al., 2014). Many principals focus on the technical mandates of IDEA versus how to provide instructional supports for students with disabilities along with confusion on how to implement the mandates of the law.

### **Educational Leadership of Principals in Special Education**

Since the onset of rights for students with disabilities, school principals had a limited role in the education of students with disabilities. Principals ensured that special education was a place for students with disabilities to be educated, but rarely engaged in the educational process for these students. Over time principals have gained more and more responsibility as it pertains to students with special needs. The NCLB Act of 2002 caused principals to inherit greater responsibility for the education of all students. IDEA of 2004 expanded the role of the principal to include special education leadership (Sumbera et al., 2014). In the past, principals served as building managers and student disciplinarians, but today they play a key role in school improvement and improving student outcomes (Hanley, 2015). With this expanded role, the principal now has become the educational leader for all students and must comply with the laws

surrounding special education services for those students identified with disabilities. The question that arises for this new role centers around the amount of training that principals have received in order to perform the daunting task of supervision of special education.

A study conducted by Davis (2001), focused on 345 elementary and secondary principals and their training in the area of special education. The study showed that 77% of principals received no or some training in the area of special education. With only 4.8% (16) of the 345 respondents reporting having high or very high exposure to children with disabilities in their formal collegiate coursework. With this limited exposure, the leadership for individuals with disabilities is in jeopardy. Principals lacking the background knowledge in special education leadership struggle to lead this unique area. Their lack of a fundamental background causes the true meaning and goals of special education to be carried out.

School leaders play a central role in creating the conditions necessary for changes to occur by determining what initiatives are undertaken and, ultimately, how inclusively a school functions (Salisbury, 2006). Significant findings revealed the principals who feel unprepared in special education do not always develop an inclusionary culture, or understand its benefits to student learning (Hofreiter, 2017). The school principal must have the knowledge and skills to advocate for appropriate placement and services of all students enrolled in their schools as mandated by federal and state legislation (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). The responsibilities of the principal, in relation to special education, have increased over the years while the required training has remained the same. While being underprepared, it is still widely accepted that the role of the principal is paramount in facilitating and sustaining inclusive practices. Case studies involving successful inclusive schools report that: (a) principals have a clear commitment to inclusion that is non-negotiable, and (b) they employ a range of key practices and activities as

they lead and participate in the change process (Lyons, 2016). These effective principals' model positive attitudes towards acceptance of all children, visit special education classrooms, spend time with students with disabilities, tour the building daily, and become involved with the concerns of all students and programs (Garrison-Wade, 2005).

Due to the lack of a fundamental understanding in special education, a complete and cohesive program may struggle to exist. Principals work with staff to: (a) identify professional development needs and preferences, (b) facilitate access teacher-centered professional development opportunities, and (c) create schedules and school structures to enable teachers to work together to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive practices (Lyons, 2016). While professional development and school structures are key, the lack of the fundamental understanding of special education can significantly impact one's ability to successfully create the opportunities needed for professional development because principals themselves need the professional development in the area of special education.

### **Principal's Role in Mainstreaming/Inclusion**

Including students with disabilities in the regular education environment has taken dramatic changes since the onset of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The rights of students with disabilities have been impacted by several key cases and laws. These cases and laws have given them the rights to be educated with their peers. Just 70 years ago many individuals with disabilities were segregated in separate schools. The movement of normalization and deinstitutionalization were introduced in the middle of the 1960s, which advocated removing these students from institutions, and integrating them with their families and local communities (Alquraini, 2013). In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped

Children Act (EHA), mandating that all public school provide education services to children and youth with disabilities (Brock, 2018).

In 1990, Public Law 94-142 was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). With the renaming of the law, there were several changes that occurred. Inclusion of students with disabilities was a key change in IDEA. Facilitating an inclusionary culture comes from the key leader within the institution. Principals who are actively engaged in developing inclusive schools can offer the field authentic perspectives about both the process of changing school cultures and practices and the challenges that others encounter (Salisbury, 2006).

In a study conducted by Salisbury and McGregor (2002), the researchers found that when principals shared similar practices where diversity, collaboration, and equality were valued, the inclusive culture existed. The principals in this study shared common personal attributes as leaders. They shared decision-making power with their staff, led by example, extended the core values around inclusiveness and quality to initiatives throughout their buildings, and actively promoted learning communities.

The leadership practices that are set by the principal sets the stage for a culture of inclusiveness. Bateman and Bateman (2002) state that it is up to the principal to prepare the school and the staff for inclusion and to provide the backing. They give eight key steps to ensure that the culture for inclusionary practices is set and is maintained. Those steps are:

1. Ensure that staff is aware of the legal requirements and terms
2. Make sure staff and teacher know that most students with disabilities are already educated in general education classrooms most of the time and are included in almost all of the noncurricular activities
3. Reassure teachers that while they need to make changes in their instructional methods

and materials, support will be provided

4. Explain that students with disabilities often do better in structured activities
5. Ensure staff understand that decisions made regarding children with disabilities are individualized decisions
6. Explain that large numbers of students with disabilities will not be assigned to any one teacher
7. Time is needed for planning, meetings, professional development and conferences
8. Professional development will be planned around what teachers say the need to learn about students with disabilities (Bateman & Bateman, 2002)

### **Developing a Systematic Program that Covers a Continuum of Services**

In Pennsylvania, each school district is required to provide a continuum of services that meets the needs of all students. The IDEA requires that all students with disabilities must be educated in the LRE (McLeskey et al., 2011). This LRE must be met through the continuum of services. It is assumed that every person with a disability can be located somewhere along this continuum based on their individual needs (Taylor, 2004). The graphic in *Figure 1* from Lightner (2020) illustrates the continuum of services that school districts must consider when determining a student's LRE.

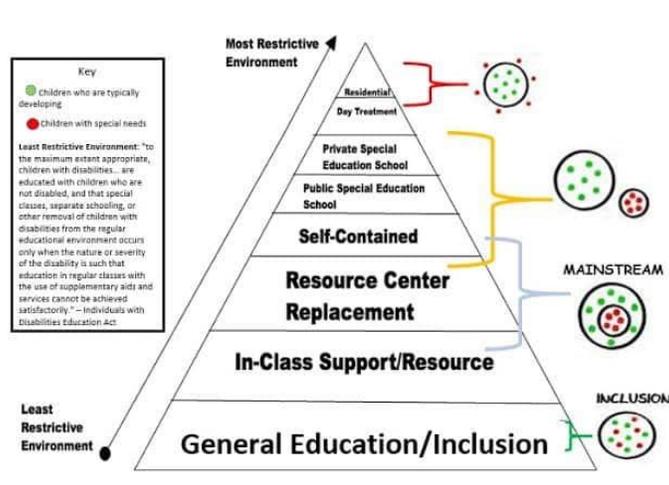


Figure 1 Lightner, L. (2020, June 04). Least restrictive environment in special education {A beginner's guide to LRE}. Retrieved June 25, 2020, from <https://adayinourshoes.com/iep-lre-least-restrictive-environment/>

Furthermore, in Pennsylvania, schools must be able to provide a continuum of support services to meet the needs of all students with disabilities. The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (2018 pp. 10-11) describes these services as follows:

*Learning Support* – for children whose greatest need of support is in the areas of reading, writing, math, or speaking or listening related to academics.

*Autistic Support* – for children who require services in the areas of communication, social skills, or behavior.

*Emotional Support* – for children whose greatest need is for social, emotional, and behavioral help.

*Life Skills Support* – for children whose greatest need is to learn academic, functional, or vocational skills that will enable them to live and work independently.

*Blind and Visually Impaired Support* – for children who require services related to visual impairment or blindness. The IEP for these students must address the extent to which Braille will be taught and used.

*Deaf and Hearing Impaired Support* – for children who require services related to deafness or hearing impairment. The IEP for these students must include a communication plan to address language and communication needs.

*Multiple Disabilities Support* – for children with more than one disability, the combination of which results in severe impairment, and who require services in academic, functional, or vocational skills.

*Physical Support* – for children who have a physical disability and require services in functional motor skill development.

*Speech and Language Support* – for children who have speech and language impairments and require services to develop communication skills.

All of these areas of support also need to be able to be accessed through a level of support according to the student's needs. In Pennsylvania, the amount of time that a student receives special education services is divided out into three categories:

*Itinerant* – special Education support provided for 20% or less each day

*Supplemental* – special education supports provided for more than 20% of the day but less than 80% of the day

*Full-Time* – special education support provided for 80% or more of the day

(Roth, 2014, p. 43)

It is the responsibility of the IEP team to ensure that the amount of time is calculated to meet the individual needs of each student placed in special education. The LEA must be able to ensure that the continuum of services in all areas are in place to meet the unique needs of all the students in the district. The principal and lead district administrators are often in charge of ensuring this is in place. Often principals struggle to ensure that the inclusive cohesiveness exists within the walls of their school. Principals have identified systematic factors such as time constraints and size of school as impacting their ability to fulfill their responsibilities for leading special education (Sumbera et al., 2014).

Least restrictive data for the seven school districts included in the study was taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Education website for the year 2019-2020. The data shows the percentage of students included in regular education more than 80% of their day, less than 40% of their day, and students that educated in other settings. Where PDE is not displaying LEA data in the table, it is due to a small group size.

**Table 3**

***Educational Environments (Ages 6-21, Age 5 in Grade K/1)***

<b>School District</b>	<b>SE inside Reg. class 80% or more</b>	<b>SE inside reg. class &lt;40%</b>	<b>SE other settings</b>
District A	59.6%	-----	9.3%
District B	61.4%	11.8%	-----
District C	86.5%	-----	-----
District D	69.9%	14.6%	-----
District E	67.4%	16.7%	-----

District F	76.3%	-----	-----
District G	72.1%	-----	-----
District H	61.6%	12.0%	-----

**Principals Leading Special Education**

In a recent study conducted regarding principal’s perspective on inclusive schools found three major findings that impact a principal and their views on inclusive education:

1. Schools considered by others and themselves to be inclusive varied markedly in their reported level of implementation
2. Partially inclusive school reflected stronger administrative support and commitment and reported service more students with wider ranges of support needs in general education for a greater percentage of time.
3. Schools evolving in their inclusive practices were similar in their use of collaborative governance structures, their efforts to promote the engagement and support of parents, the core values that characterized the cultural context of these schools, and the challenges reported by principals as they worked to developed inclusive education.

(Salisbury, 2006, p. 79)

Often, when principals lead special education they focus on the concern for compliance with the law. Pushing principals beyond concern for compliance toward the desire to understand the needs of students with disabilities, instructional strategies that work, and the social development of students are crucial to meeting the goal of high performance for all students (Sumbera et al., 2014) When school leaders focus on fundamental instructional issues and provide ongoing collaborative professional learning, academic outcomes for students with

disabilities and others at risk improve (Schechter & Feldman, 2019). These collaborative practices with both regular and special educators promote an academic rich learning environment for all students.

In a recent study conducted by Roberts & Guerra (2017), the researchers focused on the needs of principals regarding their training in special education and their ability to lead special education within their schools. Through the findings of the study, it was apparent that school leadership preparation programs need to increase the requirements in the area of special education. The results showed three significant findings:

1. The lowest level of knowledge was in designing curriculum for students with disabilities
2. Lack of knowledge in special education laws, Section 504, and RtI
3. Lack of multicultural education

School principal preparation programs lack the emphasis on special education, but they are moving in a direction of involving more special education coursework and experiences in their programs. In 2006, more than a third of respondents in a study stated that they had no direct experience with children with disabilities as part of their credentialing coursework to become principals. In 2015 the study revealed that percentage had dropped to 18 percent. Nearly 4 out of 5 of the respondents in the 2015 study said they only had once course (Samuels, 2018). The requirements for special education coursework and experiences surrounding special education continue to not be a priority within these principal preparation programs.

Bateman, Wysocki, et. al. (2017) discuss in great detail the need for additional training in the area of special education in order for principals to be able to effectively lead special education within their schools. They identified 30 key areas that principals must be fluent in

relation to special education in order to be an effective special education leader. Those 30 competencies are as follows:

1. Describe the six major parts of the IDEA and their purposes
2. Describe the child find requirement, and what is meant by an affirmative duty
3. Describe a nondiscriminatory evaluation and its components
4. Describe an independent educational evaluation and what should be done when one is either requested or received
5. Describe the age requirements of students served by the IDEA
6. Describe a multidisciplinary team and its members
7. Describe school district responsibilities with respect to Free and appropriate public education
8. Describe the purpose of the IEP and how it relates to communication, management, accountability, compliance and monitoring, and evaluation
9. Describe the persons required to attend an IEP meeting
10. Describe the purpose of measurable annual goals
11. Describe progress monitoring and its importance in the IEP process
12. Describe the steps a school district should take to ensure parental involvement in the IEP process
13. Describe the purpose of Section 504
14. Describe differences between the IDEA and Section 504
15. Describe “major life activities” as defined by Section 504
16. Describe a manifestation determination and its purpose
17. Describe a behavior intervention plan and what should be included

18. Describe the purpose of a functional behavioral assessment and when it should be conducted
19. Describe rules and factors considered in determining whether a series of suspensions would constitute a pattern of exclusions
20. Describe related services, including when they should be provided, and limitations on their service
21. Describe the factors an IEP team should consider in determining placement
22. Describe and explain the continuum of alternative placements
23. Describe how the general curriculum should be part of placement decisions
24. Describe supplementary aids or services that may be used to help a student to be educated in the least restrictive environment
25. Describe the purpose and expectations of the transition requirements (part C to B and from secondary to postsecondary) for a student with an IEP
26. Describe the information IDEA requires be supplied to parents of students with disabilities regarding student records
27. Describe how a student can be no longer eligible for special education and related services
28. Describe the IDEA's general procedural requirements
29. Describe the stay-put provision
30. Describe how school districts can ensure that they do not discriminate against students with disabilities

Understanding each of the key areas in special education is not only vital in ensuring the laws are maintained, but rather the overall needs of the student with disabilities are being met. Through each of the 30 attributes that are described, the principal can be considered well versed in leading special education. While there is not one of the elements that supersedes another, the importance of each factor to ensure that a successful special education program that is rooted in theory and law is conducted within their school.

In a study conducted by Templeton (2017), he researched how the varying levels of knowledge and skill in special education affect the school-level leadership of special education programs. The results of the study showed that when principals are knowledgeable and skilled in special education they place a high value on special education. By providing students, with varying levels of disabilities, opportunities to acquire both functional and academic skills through authentic experiences within the natural environment the leaders with fundamental knowledge are much more successful.

### **Summary**

Being knowledgeable of special education laws and processes is not a simple task. Leading special education is a responsibility that many principals in rural school districts are required to perform. As the laws continue to take shape, meeting the needs of students should be in the forefront. The basic knowledge of the special education laws and rights of students with disabilities is essential in meeting the needs of the students that principals serve. From how the disability affects learning and socialization, to the rights to FAPE, principals must be the driver of successful integration of students with disabilities into their respective schools.

Being educated in the LRE is every child's right under the law. Ensuring that each student with a disability be given this right is the job of the local education agency. By

establishing a continuum of services and promoting inclusion, the school principal can be sure that each child is given every opportunity to be educated with their non-disabled peers. By placing the needs of the students with disabilities at the forefront, principals can develop programs, scheduling, and resources to ensure that to the maximum extent possible the students with disabilities are educated in their LRE.

### CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

#### **Action Plan: Intervention**

This research study utilizes qualitative analysis to determine the perspectives that principals have in regards to determining the LRE for students with disabilities in rural Northwestern Pennsylvania schools. Proposed within the methodology are the instrumentation utilized along with the overall data analyses that will be used throughout the study. Data collection methods aligned to statistical references are essential to determine the outcomes of the study. The chapter outlines all of the data collection methods along with the in-depth analysis of the procedures used to interpret the data. Limitations will be outlined along with an overall summary of the methodology to be utilized in this research study.

In this study, the research will be used to determine the attitudes and determining factors that principals utilize when determining the least restrictive placement for students with disabilities. A qualitative analysis will be utilized to develop this study. There will be no variables within the study that will be manipulated, rather a data gathering along with informational interviews. This study will utilize a convenience sample of research subjects to survey all of the elementary, middle, and high school principals along with assistant principals in school districts in Northwestern Pennsylvania. All of the principals and assistant principals assist the special education departments in making educational placements within the schools by acting as the LEA.

Each of the school districts are from Clarion, Venango and Forest counties in northwestern Pennsylvania. Data received from the Pennsylvania Department of Education's database entitled *Data at a Glance, 2019-2020* reports show that the student population of each of the schools within the study are as follows:

**Table 3*****Student Population for Selected Schools in Research Study***

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Student Population</b>
District A	651
District B	1151
District C	399
District D	1893
District E	736
District F	597
District G	579
District H	835

The schools that were selected for this study were determined based on a total student enrollment under 2000 students. Furthermore, the special education population in 2019-2020 for each of the schools is as follows:

**Table 4*****Special Education Population for Schools Selected in Research Study***

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Total Number of Students Identified as Receiving Special Education</b>	<b>Percent of total population identified as receiving special education services</b>
District A	117	18%

District B	227	19.7%
District C	96	24.1%
District D	313	16.5%
District E	131	17.8%
District F	93	15.6%
District G	122	21.1%
District H	124	14.9%

Within each of the school districts there are various numbers of principals that will be utilized as research subjects in this study. The following table shows the number of principals and assistant principals in each of the school districts that will be asked to participate in the research study.

**Table 5**

*Number of Principal's in Each of the Selected Schools in the Research Study*

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Elementary Principals</b>	<b>Elementary Assistant Principals</b>	<b>Middle/High School Principals</b>	<b>Middle/High School Assistant Principals</b>
District A	1	0	1	0
District B	1	1	1	1
District C	1	0	1	0
District D	3	1	2	1
District E	1	0	1	0
District F	1	0	1	0
District G	1	0	1	0

District H	1	0	1	0
<b>Totals</b>	10	2	9	2
<b>Total Available Participants</b>	<b>23</b>			

**Data Collection**

Survey Monkey will be utilized to create the survey that will expose three separate sections. Those sections include: demographics, attitudes toward inclusion, and hypothetical questions in determining LRE. Once created, the researcher will attend the local intermediate unit’s principals meeting that is held monthly at the intermediate unit to describe the study and give an overview of the survey.

Surveys will be distributed electronically via email along with a paper copy for return upon completion. Upon receipt of the surveys the researcher will also schedule a face to face interview to gather further information related to the results of the survey. These interviews will be transcribed for information relating to determining LRE. Interviews are guided-question conversations, or an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest (Tracy, 2013). Individuals completing the survey’s will be required to list their names, title, and district in which they work. During the analyzation phase of the research these will become coded as corresponding numbers.

**Timeline**

The timeline of implementation of the research will be upon approval from the institutional review board with an approval on or before April 30, 2021. Once approved, research is expected to begin on or before May 1, 2021. Attendance at the principal’s meeting will be in May 2021. At this meeting the explanation of the proposed study and the overview of

the survey and interview will take place. Survey's will be given to all 21 principals and assistant principals at that time. Following the meeting, an email explanation will occur and be sent electronically to all individuals.

Survey's will have a two-week window for completion. There will be two reminder emails sent to all participants for completion of the survey. Upon receipt of the survey, the researcher will schedule an individual interview to take place. These interviews will be conducted and the total research gathering phase of the project is expected to be completed by June 15, 2021.

### **Data Analysis**

The information gathered from the survey will be gathered and analyzed to determine any common themes that emerge through the qualitative study. To analyze the questions related to the survey, descriptive statistics will be used. Distribution frequencies of the responses will be utilized for all responses including the demographic information. A correlation analysis will be used to evaluate the relationship between subjects. A correlation analysis is a statistical method used to evaluate the strength of relationship between two quantitative variables. This comparison will look at elementary principals versus middle and high school principals along with principals versus assistant principals. This will be utilized to determine whether their views differ.

### **Presentation of Results**

Once analyzed, a summary of the results will be written fully describing the findings. A copy of the results will be distributed to all participants in the survey. Interviews to discuss the results of the findings will be scheduled upon request. Also, a presentation of the findings will be conducted at the local intermediate unit principals' meeting in August 2021. At this time, a

copy of the results and the presentation will take place. This will allow for distribution of the findings to all stakeholders in the field. Also, another presentation will take place at the monthly contact meeting. This meeting is for all special education leaders in the entire intermediate unit.

### **Limitations**

With any investigation there are limitations. With this particular study there are limitations surrounding the sample size of the participants. The sample size is limited to 23 potential respondents. The geographical area is also a limitation of the study. Although the area could be broadened, the study would need to extend the limitation of the total student population size beyond 2,000 students. By keeping the selected schools under the 2000 population mark, the research can analyze the rural schools in northwestern Pennsylvania.

### **Summary**

Overall, the use of a survey both electronically and in written form of the same questions will be utilized to determine the perspectives of principals and assistant principals in Clarion, Venango and Forest counties in northwestern Pennsylvania. The methods utilized will be able to statistically analyze the results to determine the correlation of the perspectives that principals and assistant principals utilize when making decisions regarding where the students LRE best fits their needs and how those determinations are made.

## CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives that principals in the Northwestern part of Pennsylvania have when determining the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. This study utilized school districts in three counties in Northwestern Pennsylvania to examine the perspectives from the principals and assistant principals. This study utilized consent for participants to complete the research from the building administrator(s) in each of the participating school districts. Each individual participant gave consent to participate in the study. In the chosen school districts, there was a total participant pool of 23 principals and assistant principals that could partake in the research study. There was a total of 10 elementary principals, two assistant elementary principals, nine high school principals, and two assistant high school principals.

The data gathering portion of the study utilized an online survey that examined questions surrounding least restrictive environment along with inclusionary questions to gain insight of their perspectives. Following the survey, individual interviews were conducted to examine further perspectives of the principals in relation to least restrictive environment. Participant interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 10 minutes each.

The research pool of 23 participants included 15 participants that completed the entire research. There were 13 principals and 2 assistant principals that engaged in the research. This provides a 71.4% participation rate for participants who completed the entire research. There were 16 participants that completed the survey portion of the research. This represents 76.1% of the participant pool that completed the first portion of the research. One participant chose to not partake in the interview portion of the research.

### **Demographics**

The participants in the study were tasked with answering 10 questions surrounding their own demographic information during the initial part of the online survey. This personal information allowed for the respondents to provide information regarding the following:

1. gender
2. age
3. years in education
4. position
5. years as a principal/assistant principal
6. teaching certifications
7. number of college courses in special education
8. number of in-service hours focusing on inclusion or LRE
9. number of special education students in their respective building(s)
10. number of IEP meetings per year that the respondents are considered the LEA

The participants' first question was to list their gender. Table 6 outlines the frequency distribution of the responses.

**Table 6**

*Distribution of Gender Responses*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Male	10	62.50%
Female	6	37.50%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

In reviewing the data shown in Table 6, there were  $n=10$  (62.50%) male participants along with  $n=6$  (37.50%) female administrators. The number of participants that engaged in this portion of the research was  $n=16$  (100%). The National Center for Education Statistics shows that the overall distribution of gender for public school principals are 46% male and 54% female (2021). The male participants within this study are 16.5% higher than the national average compared to the female participants who represent a 16.5% lower participation rate to the national average. The average in the researched geographic area is comparable to the national average for gender for public school principals.

The participants' second question was to identify their current age. Table 7 outlines the frequency distribution of the responses.

**Table 7**

*Distribution of Ages of Participants*

Age Range	Frequency	Percent
25-34	0	0%
35-44	7	43.75%
45-54	5	31.25%
55-64	4	25%
65+	0	0%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

Table 7 displays the overall distribution of the ages of the participants including ages 25-34,  $n=0$  (0%), ages 35-44,  $n=7$  (43.75%), ages 45-54,  $n=5$  (31.25%), ages 55-64,  $n=4$  (25%), ages 65+,  $n=0$  (0%). The data shows that the concentration of the participants fall in the age ranges of 35-64. The data shows that all the participants started their careers well after the

reauthorization of IDEA of 1990, while 43.75% of the participants began their administrative careers after NCLB was enacted in 2001.

The participants third question was to identify the number of years they have been in the educational field. Table 8 outlines the frequency distribution of the responses.

**Table 8**

*Distribution of Participants Years in Education*

<b>Number of Years in Education</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<1-5	0	0%
6-10	0	0%
11-15	2	12.50%
16-20	8	50%
21-25	1	6.25%
26-30	4	25%
31+	1	6.25%
Totals		100%

The data distributed in Table 8 displays the principal and assistant principal’s years in the educational field. The data represents a wide range of experience from <1-31+ years of education by the principals and assistant principals in the profession of education. The specific data shows, <1-5 years  $n=2$  (12.5%), 16-20 years  $n=8$ , (50%), 21-25 years,  $n=1$  (6.25%), 26-30 years  $n=4$  (25%), 31+ years  $n=1$  (6.25%). The highest percentage of participants have between 16-20 years of educational experience. In the United States, the national average tenure of principals in their schools was four years as of 2016-2017. This number masks considerable

variation, with 35 percent of principals being at their school for less than two years, and only 11 percent of principals being at their school for 10 or more years (Levin & Bradley, 2019). The participants within this study show a significant difference in comparison with 87.5% of the participants having more than 16 years of educational experience.

The participants' fourth question was to identify their current position within the school district. Table 9 outlines the frequency distribution of each of the participants responses.

**Table 9**

*Distribution of Current Administrative Position*

<b>Position</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Principal	14	87.50%
Assistant Principal	2	12.50%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

Table 9 shows the total number of participants represented in the research study and their current role as principal or assistant principal. The data shows that of the participants,  $n=14$  (87.50%) held the role of the principal. Furthermore, just  $n=2$  (12.50%) of the participants claimed the title of the assistant principal within their districts. Being in a very rural area of Pennsylvania, many of the schools represent a very low number of total students, therefore the use of multiple principals in particular buildings is rare.

The participants' fifth question was to identify the number of years each participant has served in the role of principal or assistant principal. Table 10 reflects the frequency distribution of the participants responses.

**Table 10**

*Distribution of Participants Years as a Principal/Assistant Principal*

<b>Number of Years</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<1-5	4	25%
6-10	7	43.75%
11-15	3	18.75%
16-20	2	12.50%
21-25	0	0%
26-30	0	0%
More than 30	0	0%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

The participant data in Table 10 shows that  $n=11$  (68.75%) had less than 10 years as a principal or an assistant principal. This compared to  $n=5$  (31.25%) of the participants having 10-20 years of experience as a principal. There were  $n=0$  participants who had more than 20 years of experience as a principal or assistant principal. The National Center for Education Statistics shows that the national average experience for principals are 37% have 3 or fewer years of experience, 36% have 4-9 years of experience, 24% have 10-19 years of experience and just 4% have more than 20 years of experience (2021). The data gathered in Table 10 is commensurate with the national statistics with each year span only differing by minimal percentage points.

The sixth question was to identify the current certifications of the participants. This question asked four specific questions in relation to the participants certification area(s). The participant was able to identify whether they have a general education certification, special

education certification, both certifications, or an alternate certificate. Table 11 outlines the frequency distribution of the responses.

**Table 11**

*Distribution of Participants Teaching Certification(s)*

Teaching Certification	Frequency	Percent
General Education	12	75%
Special Education	2	12.50%
Both	1	6.25%
Other	1	6.25%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

Table 11 outlines the certification areas of the participants within the study. The data shows that of the 16 participants  $n=12$  (75%) hold only a general education certification, while  $n=3$  (18.75%) hold special education certifications. There was  $n=1$  (6.25%) participant who held a certification that was not a general education or special education certification.

Question seven was to identify the approximate number of collegiate courses that the participants have had in relation to special education. Table 12 outlines the frequency distribution of the responses of the participants.

**Table 12**

*Distribution of Participants College Courses in Special Education*

Number of Courses	Frequency	Percent
0	0	0%
1-3	10	62.50%
4-9	2	12.50%

10+	4	25%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

That data in Table 12 outlines and shows that more than half (62.50%) of the participants have had no more than three college courses in the identified area of special education. There were  $n=6$  (37.5%) participants that stated they have four or more collegiate courses in the area of special education. When comparing the data within Table 12 to the data within Table 11 it can be concluded that  $n=1$  participant who had general education certification or an alternate certification has had more than 10 courses in special education. There were  $n=3$  participants that had special education certifications leading to the increase in the number of collegiate courses in the area of special education.

The eighth question in the survey identified the number of in-service hours that the participants have had in relation to inclusive practices within schools over the course of their career. Table 13 represents the frequency distribution of the responses to the question.

**Table 13**

*Distribution of Participants Number of In-Service Hours in Inclusive Practices or LRE*

Number of Hours	Frequency	Percent
0	0	0%
1-5	3	18.75%
6-10	2	12.50%
11-15	3	18.75%
16-20	3	18.75%
20+	5	31.25%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

When examining the data from the distribution of the self-reported in-service hours that the participants received, it is noted there is no concentration and the number of in-service hours were spread from 1-20+ hours evenly. The highest number of participants received 20+ hours of in-service in the area of inclusive practices or LRE with  $n=5$  (31.25%). The overall comparison shows that  $n=11$  (68.75%) of the participants have received more than 11 hours of in-service in inclusive practices.

The ninth question was to determine the number of students identified as receiving special education within each of the participants' individual schools. Table 14 outlines the frequency distribution of the self-reported responses.

**Table 14**

*Distribution of the Number of Special Education Students in Participant's Building(s)*

<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
0-50	7	43.75%
51-100	4	25%
101-150	5	31.25%
151-200	0	0%
201-250	0	0%
250+	0	0%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

Table 14 shows the distribution of the total number of special education students in each of the principals respective building(s). The data shows that there was  $n=0$  principals that serve as the LEA for more than 150 special education students. The school districts within this study were identified as rural schools with a lower population. The data indicates  $n=7$  (43.75%) of the

participants only oversee no more than 50 special education students within the building in which they serve as principal. While  $n=9$  (56.25%) oversee between 51-150 students who require special education services.

The tenth and final question of the first part of the survey was to identify the total number of IEP meetings that principals and assistant principals participate in throughout the current school year. Table 15 shows the self-reported frequency distribution of the participants responses.

**Table 15**

*Distribution of the Number of IEP Meetings Per Year in which the Participant is the LEA*

Percentage of Meetings	Frequency	Percent
Less than 10%	10	62.50%
10%-25%	3	18.75%
26%-50%	0	0%
51%-75%	1	6.25%
76%-100%	2	12.50%
<b>Totals</b>		<b>100%</b>

The data within Table 15 shows that  $n=13$  (81.25%) of the principals and assistant principals within the study only served as the LEA for less than 25% of the IEP meetings for the special education students within the district. While  $n=0$  participants indicated that they provide LEA services between 25% and 50%, the final  $n=3$  (18.75%) served in the role of LEA for 51%-100% of the IEP meetings within the district. Participants noted that the Director of Special Education also serves as the LEA for IEP meetings within the districts. This data is important

when comparing the determining factors for students with the district when placing students in the least restrictive environment.

**Attitudes Toward Inclusion**

The second part of the research focused on the attitudes that principals had toward the inclusion of students with disabilities within the general education classroom. Each of the statements asked the participants to rate statements. The statements within this part of the survey used a Likert scale comprised of the following: completely disagree (CD), somewhat disagree (SD), neutral (N), somewhat agree (SA), completely agree (CA). The survey was comprised of 10 statements as indicated in Table 16 below.

The participation rate of the responses for each of the sections below show a total of  $n=16$  participation rate. All participants answered 100% of the questions by utilizing the rating scales provided. Table 16 displays the frequency distribution of the responses for each of the 10 questions.

**Table 16**

*Distribution of Responses to Attitudes toward Inclusion*

<b>Question</b>	<b>CD</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>CA</b>
General education teachers have the background knowledge to provide sufficient educational services to students with disabilities	0	2	1	12	1
My school makeup is designed to meet the needs of all students with disabilities	0	2	0	12	2
My school has the resources in place to meet the needs of all students	0	1	1	11	3

At times, students with disabilities distract students without disabilities from the learning process	0	2	7	5	2
My district provides adequate time for training on inclusion of students with disabilities	0	3	2	9	2
Students without disabilities can benefit from contact with disabilities	1	0	0	3	12
An inclusive classroom lowers the expectations for general education students	7	5	3	1	0
In general, students with disabilities should be placed in special education classes to better meet their individual needs	7	6	2	1	0
General education curriculum and programs should be adapted to meet the needs of all students including students with disabilities	0	0	2	3	11
Students with intellectual disabilities (generally IQ below 70) should not be included in core content general education classrooms. Their instruction should take place in the special education classes to better meet their ability levels	3	6	7	0	0

Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the data within each of the responses from the participants. A Cronbach's Alpha test was applied to the survey results. Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. To accurately conduct a Cronbach's Alpha to determine the reliability of the survey, the responses

to questions 17 and 18 were reverse coded due to the negative nature of each of the questions. Reverse coding is utilized to increase the validity of a questionnaire in particular when some items will result with positive responses and other items will result in negative responses. The reverse coding in this study was utilized to reverse two items due to their anticipated negative responses. Once each of the two statements were reverse coded, the Cronbach's Alpha reliability was  $\alpha = .558$ .

Next, each of the responses were individually analyzed to determine overall factors that could be determined. The mean, median, mode and standard deviation were determined for each question. Table 16 summarizes the statistical analyzations for each of the 10 questions.

**Table 16**

*Descriptive Statistics for the 10 Questions Utilizing the Likert Scale*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
1	3.75	4	4	0.75
2	3.875	4	4	0.78
3	4	4	4	0.70
4	3.4375	3	3	0.86
5	3.625	4	4	0.93
6	4.5625	5	5	0.99
7	2	1.5	1	1.12
8	1.8125	2	1	0.88
9	4.5625	5	5	0.70
10	2.25	2	3	0.75
Total	3.3875	---	---	0.85

The data summarized above show that out of the 10 questions answered, the mode for 6/10 of the questions resulted in a positive response rate. There were 2/10 questions where the most occurring response was equal to neutral (3). The two questions that resulted in the mode being a 1 or 2 can be explained as the two questions that were reverse coded due to the negative anticipated response based on the formation of the question.

The total mean score for the survey was equal to 3.3875 which shows a neutral average to the responses to all of the questions. There were 3/10 questions where the mean of the responses was positive. Furthermore, the results of three questions showed a negative mean and the remaining questions resulted in a neutral mean.

The overall standard deviation for the survey resulted in  $n=0.85$ . The individual standard deviation from each of the questions, places all but one question below the 1.0 standard deviation threshold. Analyzation of the standard deviation in reference to the mean, median and modes of the individual questions and the overall survey show that the results of the survey are neutral or somewhat positive.

### **Hypothetical Questions in Determining Least Restrictive Environment**

The third section of the survey explored four hypothetical questions to the participants. The responses to the questions were used to find any common knowledge that the principal and assistant principals have in regards to situations that may arise with students with disabilities. These questions explored four different approaches to determining the LRE for students with disabilities. Each of the participants responded in narrative form with their explanation to each of the questions.

In question one participants were asked, *“After completing a reevaluation, the school psychologist determined that the student met criteria for a student with an intellectual disability. The LEA made the recommendation to the parents that due to the determination of an intellectual disability the best educational placement would be in the intermediate unit’s Life Skills classroom. Did the school district offer FAPE in the LRE? Please explain your answer.”*

The results of the narrative responses show that  $n=2$  participants answered *yes* to the question. These responses explained that based upon the evaluation the services that were being offered, were in fact offered in the least restrictive environment and were appropriate for the child. There were  $n=10$  respondents who answered *no* with explanations as to why the district did not offer FAPE. The results also showed that  $n=1$  respondent was not sure of the answer and  $n=3$  needed more information within the question in order to make an informed decision.

In question 2 the participants were asked to respond to the following question, *“A student enrolled over the summer with a history of a learning disability. At the enrollment meeting the parent requested a reevaluation to occur. The principal informed the parent that the reevaluation could not be initiated until the start of the new school year. Was the principal correct in his statement? Please explain your answer.”* The results of the narrative responses show that  $n=9$  participants answered the question with a “yes” result. The respondents’ narratives centered around the timeline for evaluations to occur and that the 60-day timeline does not apply when summer break is involved. There were  $n=5$  participants who stated that the principal was not correct, and the reevaluation would need to begin in the summer. Respondents stated that special education work continues over the summer, while others indicated that it would all be dependent upon psychologist availability over the summer break. From the respondents,  $n=2$  were unsure of the answer to the question and stated that they would follow up

with either the school psychologist or the supervisor of special education to determine the appropriate next steps in the process.

Question 3 embodied the respondent to answer the question, *“Due to safety concerns an elementary building was closed and the students were moved from one elementary school to another. Parents of a student with an intellectual disability demanded that they have a meeting. They are stating that there was an educational placement change with their child and they will be filing a due process complaint. Were the parents correct? Please explain why you chose your answer.”* The results of the narrative responses show  $n=2$  participants stated that the parents were correct. There were  $n=13$  participants who stated and explained that the parents were incorrect and that a complete building move would not be a change of placement for their child with disabilities. A total of  $n=1$  participant indicated that they were not sure of the answer to the question but stated that they believed the overall safety of the student supersedes educational placement for students.

The final hypothetical question asked, *“At a recent IEP meeting the IEP discussed the least restrictive environment for their child and determined that the student could remain in regular education as long as the child received an extra 20 minutes of Title I support 3 x's per week. A revision was conducted placing the Title I support in the IEP. Two nine weeks have passed and due to scheduling conflicts, the Title I support was unable to happen. The parent contacted the principal who stated that since Title I does not coincide with Chapter 14 regulations there shouldn't be any concern or need to make up those hours that were missed. Was the principal correct in his statements? Please explain why you choose your answer.”* The results show that  $n=1$  participant stated that the principal was correct because Title I support is not specially designed instruction and should not have been placed into the IEP. There were

$n=15$  participants that stated that the principal was incorrect in his statement and that the hours that were not provided would need to be made up since the service was part of the specially designed instruction within the embodied IEP. There were  $n=0$  participants who were unsure of the answer to this particular question.

### **Interview Questions**

The second phase of the research required the participants to engage in a virtual interview. Only participants that completed the survey portion of the research were included. There were  $n=16$  participants who completed the survey portion of the research. Only  $n=15$  participants completed the interview portion of the research. There was  $n=1$  participant who withdrew from the research between the survey and the interview phases.

During this phase, the research focused on attitudes of principals surrounding inclusionary practices. Participants were asked a total of nine questions surrounding their challenges and successes pertaining to inclusion within the individual school building in which they serve as the principal or the assistant principal. The virtual interview took place over the zoom platform and each of the interviews were recorded. Each of the nine questions were asked with no follow up questions.

Upon completion of the interviews, they were transcribed into Microsoft word. The responses from all of the participants were then separated out to individual question responses. Once all of the responses for the individual questions was separated, a word frequency analysis was conducted to determine common language that was utilized from each of the principals and assistant principals. Beyond the most frequent word analysis, the responses were analyzed to determine individual themes or reoccurring ideas from each of the respondents. These themes were also identified within each of the individual questions and their transcribed responses.

Question one asked the participants to respond to the following questions, *“What do you find as the most challenging aspect of determining the least restrictive environment for the children in your building?”* First, the word frequency analysis was determined that the wording from the transcribed interviews shows a total of  $n=7$  times the word “different” was utilized. The second most frequent relevant word to be used by the participants was the word “needs.” This word was found to have a total of  $n=6$ .

Second, there were  $n=2$  common phrases and themes that were utilized by the respondents. In the first phase,  $n=4$  participants stated that getting everyone on the same page when it comes to the overall needs of the students is the most challenging aspect of determining the least restrictive environment. Second, there were  $n=3$  participants who stated having enough staffing to ensure that all of the services that a student needs can be implemented in the least restrictive environment.

The second question required the participants to answer the following question, *“What do you find as the most challenging aspect of implementing IEP’s in the least restrictive environment”* The word frequency analysis for the second questions shows that the word “staff” was utilized  $n=11$  times throughout the responses. While there were  $n=8$  times that the respondents stated “education” in the interview. There were  $n=7$  times that the word “teacher” was utilized and  $n=6$  times that the phrase “IEP” was utilized.

In the common phrases and themes within this question, there were  $n=4$  participants that stated the resources and staffing to meet the overall needs of the kids are very finite and the districts lack these resources which is a struggle when meeting the individual needs of all the children, especially in a very rural school district with a lower population of students. There were  $n=4$  respondents who dictated that implementing the SDI’s in the general education

environment was difficult due to the lack of background knowledge that the regular education teachers have. They also stated, that understanding each of the SDI's and how to use the accommodations and modifications specifically to their own content area was very challenging.

The next question in the interview asked, "*What are the largest hurdles that you need to overcome with the general education teacher in order to provide an excellent inclusionary program?*" The word analysis for the question showed that the word "education" was utilized a total of  $n=9$  times in the respondent's answers. The word "needs" was utilized by the participants a total of  $n=8$  times in the transcription.

The common themes within this section focused around two general ideas. There were  $n=8$  participants that responded around the theme of differentiating the instruction for the students with special needs in the classroom. The respondents reported that general education teachers do not know how to differentiate the instruction to meet the unique individual needs of the students. Second, there were  $n=5$  participants who replied that their hurdles centered around general education teachers not thinking that students with disabilities and that have an IEP are their responsibility. They stated that often, general education teachers say that the student is the responsibility of the special education teacher and that they are "their" students.

Next, participants were asked, "*How has your building transformed toward inclusion since your tenure in the building?*" The word analysis for this question showed that the term "kids" was utilized a total of  $n=13$  times by the respondents. The term "support" was utilized  $n=8$  times in the respondent's answers.

In the general themes part of this question, there were  $n=6$  participants that stated within their tenure as the principal or assistant principal that they have drastically increased their inclusionary numbers to better service the students in the general education environment. They

summarize that utilization of the co-taught model to support the inclusionary numbers has assisted in the development of the program to decrease the amount of time that the students are pulled from the regular education environment.

Second, there were  $n=4$  participants who stated that they work with the individual student to ensure that they are included as much as possible. They further state that a slow transition from a self-contained classroom to the general education setting is necessary to ensure that the student is ready and able to be included in the environment in order to be successful.

The fifth question discussed the following question, *“What are the holes currently in your program in relation to providing education in the least restrictive environment?”* The word analysis for question five showed that the most reoccurring words included time, staffing and co-taught. The word “time” was mentioned by participants a total of  $n=12$  times. The word “staffing” was stated  $n=6$  times. Finally, the word “co-taught” was expressed  $n=5$  times.

The general themes that arose for this question centered around two centralized topics. The principals and assistant principals commonly referred to the lack of time for the students to fully participate in the program in a successful manner. They stated that to capture all of the requirements by the standards and provide interventions to the students in the least restrictive environment is very difficult with the limited time the students are in the school. The lack of staffing to meet the needs of the students was the second theme that principals and assistant principal referred to. They mentioned that there are so many different needs by the students and very limited staff to meet those needs. The participants stated that not having the ability to fill positions along with budgetary constraints have led to these holes in the program.

Participants were asked, *“What process does your school follow when determining the least restrictive environment for a student with a disability?”* in the sixth question. The word

analysis shows that the term “IEP” was identified by the participants a total of  $n=13$  times. The term “needs” was utilized  $n=8$  times by the respondents. Also, another noted term in this question was the word “team.” The participants stated team a total of  $n=6$  times.

For the general themes for this question was centered around the IEP team making the decisions for the LRE for the students in their programs. There were  $n=7$  participants that alluded to the final determination for determining the students LRE was linked directly to the IEP team’s decision and moving forward with the IEP team’s recommendation. There were  $n=3$  participants that stated that the lack of success in the general education environment is the first determining factor to move a kid to a more restrictive environment.

For the seventh question in the interview, participants were asked, “*What are the challenges you face with your special education staff in accordance with providing services in the least restrictive environment?*” In this question, participants utilized the term “teachers” a total of  $n=10$  times in the word analysis of the responses. The term “support” was utilized a total of  $n=6$  times when referring to the challenges that face the special education staff with providing services in the LRE.

The general themes that arose during the responses for this question were centered around time and management of the special education staff. There were  $n=4$  participants that stated time in reference to ensuring that the students needs are all met in the LRE. They stated that there is not enough time for planning and managing the students and ensuring all of the needs are being met in all the different environments that the students are in during the school day. Staffing was also mentioned  $n=5$  times referring to ensuring there is enough staff to meet all the unique needs of the students.

The eighth question asked, *“In general, what are your parents’ attitudes towards students in the general education placement?”* For the word analysis of the responses in this question there were three terms that arose as often stated words. The terms parents, wants, and education arose as the common spoken words. The term “parents” was utilized  $n=12$  times, while the term “wants” was utilized  $n=8$  times. “Education” was spoken  $n=8$  times as well.

For this question, there were  $n=6$  participants that stated there have not been any issues to arise and the parents’ attitudes towards students participating in the general education environment were positive. These individuals also stated that generally parents want their children in the general education placement as much as possible and that other parents do not have any issues with students with special needs being included in the general education environment.

The final question in the research asked participants, *“What do you feel is the best aspect of your school and their ability to service individuals with disabilities?”* The word analysis shows that “school” was utilized  $n=7$  times by the respondents. The term “students” was utilized  $n=7$  times during the responses. The term “needs” was also utilized  $n=7$  times when the respondents answered the question.

The general theme responses indicated that the teachers and staff all want the best for all the students that they service, including regular education teachers servicing students with disabilities. There were  $n=8$  respondents that referenced teachers doing what is best for kids. Also, the respondents stated their teachers’ willingness to adapt, be flexible and accept every student for their individual differences to meet their individual needs. There were  $n=9$  respondents that utilized these themes in their responses.

An overall word analysis was conducted on all the responses from all nine questions by all 16 participants to determine the terms that were utilized the most by participants when answering questions relating to inclusion and determining the LRE for students with disabilities.

Table 17 summarizes the frequently utilized words in the responses.

**Table 17**

***Frequency of Terms Utilized in the Interview Portion of the Research***

<b>Term</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Education	63
Students	52
Staff	41
Needs	39
IEP	32
Support	30
<b>Totals</b>	

**Summary**

This chapter presented the analysis and results of all of the data that were collected as part of the study. The first section included the demographic results summarized in table form to show all participants and their relationship with education. The second section showed how principals and assistant principals view inclusionary practices within their individual school buildings. The analysis of the interview portion of the research utilized word analysis and general themes within each of the responses to display commonly spoken terms. These terms

were in response to particular questions surrounding the LRE and inclusionary practices within each of the principal and assistant principals' schools.

The Cronbach's Alpha test for the survey showed a low reliability score when performed. The lower reliability score could be indicated by the overall participants ability to coalesce around how special education services are provided in the LRE's. A large number of principals also lack the fundamental background knowledge in the area of special education which could also lead to a lower reliability score for the survey.

Utilizing the data analysis from this chapter will address the two research questions of:

1. What are the determining factors that principals utilize when making least restrictive environment determinations for students with disabilities?
2. What are the attitudes of principals and assistant principals towards inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom?

These results and discussions associated with the overall study will be interpreted and discussed in Chapter 5. Also, Chapter 5 will conclude with limitations and recommendations for future studies in the area of determining the least restrictive environment for rural Pennsylvania schools.

## CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

This research study was to determine the perspectives of principals in determining the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. The participants within the study were from eight school districts that would be considered in the rural part of Northwestern Pennsylvania. The superintendents from all eight schools provided written permission for the principal and assistant principals to participate in the research study. There were 16 total participants that completed the entire research for the study. There was one participant that dropped from the study after completing half of the research. All eight of the school districts provided at least one participant to be part of the research study. The various experiences, previous knowledge, and overall perspectives were analyzed as a two-part research study.

During the first phase of the research, participants were given a three-part electronic survey utilizing surveymonkey.com. For the first section of the survey, participants were asked to provide background demographic data as part of the research. This data included basic demographic data along with more focused data such as years as a principal or an assistant principal, special education collegiate history, teaching certifications, building special education demographic data and specific special education experiences as a principal or assistant principal. The second part of the survey focused on attitudes that principals had towards inclusion of special education students in the classroom. For this section, respondents utilized a Likert scale to rate 10 statements regarding inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom. Participants rated each statement based on five categories: completely disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, completely agree. Finally, the third section of the survey the participants were given four hypothetical scenarios relating to decisions that were made by principals in relations to determining the LRE for students with disabilities.

Participants were asked to provide a written response to the statement and answer the corresponding question as it relates to each of the four statements that were provided.

For the second part of the research study, each of the principals and assistant principals that took part in the electronic survey were then scheduled for a virtual meeting with the researcher. During each of the interviews, participants were all asked the same nine questions in relation to determining the LRE for students with disabilities in their individual schools that they are the principal or the assistant principal. Each of the interviews were recorded for future transcription. Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed each of the interviews and then word coding and analysis was conducted to determine common themes and statements as they related to the individual questions. The responses for each of the nine questions were separated and analyzed. Also, all responses were coded and analyzed as a whole.

This chapter will provide a summary of the findings from the data analysis. Also, a summary of major findings from the interviews will be provided. Limitations to the study along with recommendations for future research studies in the area of determining the LRE for students with disabilities will also be provided.

### **Summary of Findings**

In the survey portion of this research, the demographic data overall shows that there are several deficiencies in the leadership attributes in the principal and assistant principals when it comes to leading special education. Of the 16 participants within the study only three of the 16 principals and assistant principals have a teaching certification within the area of special education. Furthermore, there were only six principals or assistant principals that noted having more than three college courses in the area of special education. This data shows that the participants within the study lacked the background knowledge in the area of special education.

While the collegiate coursework and certifications lack the background in special education, there was a larger discrepancy with the number of in-service hours that that leaders noted in the area of special education. There were 10 participants that noted 11 or more in-service hours in the area of inclusive practices. Inclusive practice is an area that principals must possess, but does not indicate a gaining of the fundamentals of special education and understanding how to effectively and efficiently determine the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. This deficiency could lead to misunderstandings and interpretations of special education laws and regulations.

This background data from the research suggests that principals and assistant principals lack the fundamental background knowledge to effectively lead the area of special education within their particular districts. Basic special education knowledge is essential to ensure that students are educated in the correct placement. These results can assist local education agencies in developing professional development opportunities for their building administrators. These professional development opportunities should focus around the fundamental special education laws and procedures necessary for effective leadership in the area of special education. Few courses and limited hours of in-services would not effectively prepare principals for making crucial decisions relating to special education laws and services. It would be suggested that intensive on-going education in the area of special education would be suggested to fill the crucial gap in background knowledge and leadership in the area of special education for both principals and assistant principals.

These results also indicate that collegiate principal preparatory programs do not fulfill or address the area of special education effectively. These formal educational programs need to ensure that principals have the basic fundamental knowledge to lead special education within

their area of certification. Increasing the number of required undergraduate or graduate level courses required for certification in the area of special education would be highly effective in building the knowledge base to lead special education when candidates become school leaders.

While the research within the study shows a lack of background knowledge in special education, it also indicated that the principals and assistant principals are not the leaders making special education related decisions within their own school building. The results show that only three principals indicated that they are the LEA who essentially determines the least restrictive environment for the students within their buildings. There was 62.50% of participants that stated they only serve as the LEA in less than 10% of the IEP meetings that are held within their particular buildings. While these results are indicative of other special education leadership within the building, the principals and assistant principals are at the top of the leadership hierarchy within the buildings and must ensure that the IEPs are implemented with fidelity for the students with disabilities within their school. This is true even when another individual serves in the LEA capacity.

As was suggested before, the use of the building principals to serve in the role of LEA could assist districts in budgetary constraints, but the background knowledge needs to be increased. If the principals had the necessary training and knowledge in special education, that training and knowledge could potentially help the district maintain compliance within the law and ensure that individuals with disabilities are serviced in the least restrictive environment and that their individual needs are being met according to their IEP. The results of the survey show that while the principals and assistant principals do not overwhelmingly serve as the role as the LEA, they also do not have the background to do so effectively.

The second part of the survey focused on the principals' and assistant principals' attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities within the regular classroom. It was also indicative of their own attitudes toward inclusion as the leader within their individual buildings. Overall, the results of this section of the survey indicated a positive attitude to inclusionary practices within the buildings in which they serve. Within the 10 questions, there were two questions that needed to be reverse coded due to the negative nature of the question. Upon completion of the reverse coding there were two questions that did not indicate a positive response rather these questions indicated a neutral response from the participants.

For the first question, participants were asked, "*At times, students with disabilities distract students without disabilities from the learning process,*" there were seven participants that responded neither disagree or agree, they responded with a neutral response. This data indicates that principals connect the distractions that students with disabilities pose to general education peers as a negative impact on these general education peers. Connecting this to previous data on teachers' background knowledge in the area of special education, there were 12 participants that stated they somewhat agree the general education teachers have the background knowledge to provide sufficient educational services to students with disabilities. Also, in the interview portion of the research, several principals indicated that students with emotional disturbance or behavioral issues are the main concern when it comes to distractibility within the general education classroom.

These results indicate that further training in the area of inclusionary practices and general teachings skills for individuals with disabilities should be provided to general education teachers. Many teachers have limited background knowledge in the area of behavior and struggle to maintain a learning environment that is free of distractions for any student, especially

a student with an emotional disturbance as their primary disability category. These trainings should focus on the use of functional behavioral assessments along with development and implementation of individual positive behavioral support plans in the general education environment. This professional development should be utilized to address students who distract from the overall learning environment for those without disabilities in the regular education environment.

The second statement that indicated a neutral response from the participants asked, *“Student’s with intellectual disabilities (generally IQ below 70) should not be included in core content general education classrooms. Their instruction should take place in the special education classes to better meet their ability levels.”* There were nine participants that completely disagreed or somewhat disagreed with this statement. This left seven participants that had a neutral response to this statement. A neutral response to this statement indicates that principals and assistant principals shows a discrepancy in determining LRE for students with disabilities and also indicates that the general education teachers do not possess the background knowledge in differentiation of instruction to meet the individual needs of the students, even in the event of a student with a lower IQ.

Principal’s historically have placed individuals with intellectual disabilities in environments outside of the general education classroom without first trying to adapt, modify and provide reasonable accommodations for these students. In *Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, the plaintiffs claimed defendants failed to identify disabled students, develop individual education programs or plans, and provide a free appropriate public education in the LRE to the maximum extent reasonably possible. Also, the plaintiffs claimed that defendants excluded disabled students solely because of their disability from participating in or from

receiving the benefits of any program that received federal funding (2010). This neutral response from 43.75% of the participants within this study, shows that the concerns raised by *Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* still exist 21 years later.

During the interview portion of the research, participants utilized the term differentiation throughout several of the responses. Differentiation of instruction links directly to the lack of knowledge in having individuals with lower IQ included in the general education environment. Professional development should be provided to the leaders within the schools to focus on how to train the teachers in differentiating instruction for students with disabilities. Specifically, teachers do a great job at adapting materials to meet the needs of the students, but struggle to differentiate instruction to meet the individual needs of the students.

The third section of the survey utilized hypothetical questions to better understand principals' knowledge of determining the LRE for students with disabilities. The first question extended the final question in the second part of the survey by asking, "*After completing a reevaluation, the school psychologist determined that the student met criteria for a student with an intellectual disability. The LEA made the recommendation to the parents that due to the determination of an intellectual disability the best educational placement would be in the intermediate unit's Life Skills classroom. Did the school district offer FAPE in the LRE?*" With three individuals indicating that yes, the district offered FAPE in the LRE, this indicates at least half of the individuals that rated the statement previously stated as neutral, also believe that just because a student is identified as a student with an intellectual disability, they automatically should be placed in a Life Skills classroom. This fundamental lack of understanding LRE and the process for the principals and assistant principals that provided the responses, links back to

professional development that is needed in the area of determining the LRE for students with complex needs.

The results of the second hypothetical question in the survey raised further concerns regarding fundamental special education knowledge in regards to special education timelines for evaluation and reevaluations. The participants were asked, "*A student enrolled over the summer with a history of a learning disability. At the enrollment meeting the parent requested a reevaluation to occur. The principal informed the parent that the reevaluation could not be initiated until the start of the new school year. Was the principal correct in his statement? Please explain your answer.*" There were seven out of 16 participants that were either unsure of the answer to this question or stated that the principal was incorrect. Timelines for evaluations and reevaluations stop during the summer break and do not need to be completed until school resumes following summer. This large percentage of responses that do not match Chapter 14 regulations continues to show a concern for the lack of fundamental special education knowledge and the need for additional training in this area.

Questions three and four of the hypothetical section reviewed educational placement for when a school building closes and providing services to students based upon their IEP. For each of these questions, principals had a firm understanding that when a building closes it has no impact on educational placement for students with disabilities as long as their educational program in the new building matches that of the building that was closing. The principals and assistant principals also had a firm understand that if there is a service listed in the IEP, that the district is responsible for providing that service.

The second part of the research required the principals and assistant principals to take part in an interview focused on attitudes on inclusionary practices. The results indicated that the

participants all had a fairly concrete understanding of inclusionary practices and continue to build the capacity within each of their individual buildings. Results also indicate that staffing was one of the main issues that schools felt was their weakness. The lack of staffing to implement an inclusionary culture to meet all the individual needs of the students was the largest hurdle that needed to be overcome.

Participants also discussed the need for additional training in the area of differentiating of instruction to meet the individual needs of the students. Many of the participants referenced differentiating as a specific area that the general education teachers struggle with when implementing IEPs in the general education environment. The implementation of various initiatives such as the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), have aided in building the capacity for differentiation; but for meeting the needs of individuals with complex needs this continues to be an area of weakness for the participants and the teachers that they service. Professional development in the area and aspects of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) would be beneficial for the teachers to engage in. The UDL guidelines are a tool used in the implementation of UDL. The guidelines offer a set of concrete suggestions that can be applied to any discipline or domain to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities (CAST, 2021). While the participants responses to the interview questions resulted in a strong connection between general education teachers teaching their content to general education students, their responses indicated that these teachers found it very challenging to utilize the principals for UDL to teach individuals with disabilities.

This study focused on two particular research questions. Question one was: *What are the determining factors that principals utilize when making least restrictive environment determinations for students with disabilities?* Through the results of the investigation, it was

clear that that the principals and assistant principals were able to utilize the components of Chapter 14 and the laws and guidelines that surround it to determine the LRE for students with disabilities. While many of the participants were unsure of these laws and guidelines comprehensively, they were able to reference them when asked explicit questions relating to determining the LRE. Overall, the participants focused on identifying the individual needs of the students and then connecting those needs design an individual program to meet the needs of the student. This fundamental understanding of determining the LRE is the first step in meeting the individual needs of the student. Often, individuals in the LEA role focus on the educational placement for the student before they determine the individualized program to meet the needs of the student.

Extending the determining factors beyond focusing on needs, participants within the study were unable to articulate the factors that they utilized when determining the LRE for individuals with disabilities within their districts. The research was inconclusive to state the final determining factors that participants utilized.

Question two centered around: *What are the attitudes of principals and assistant principals towards inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom?*

The research towards inclusion of students focused on how principals and assistant principals view inclusion within the confines of their individual buildings. The research showed an overall positive attitude towards including individuals with disabilities in the regular education classroom to the maximum extent possible. Research participants all indicated that inclusionary practices were occurring in all of their buildings. While the participants did indicate inclusionary practices, it was determined that its implementation is implemented in very different capacities with various barriers to successful implementation. All principals' and assistant principals'

positive attitudes gave indication that all schools within the research are on track for implementation of inclusion within their schools.

### **Limitations**

With any research there are limitations within the study. This particular study was no different. The one limitation was the few numbers of participants that could be included in the study. Within the districts that were involved in the study the total participant number was a sample size of 23 available participants. From the participant pool there were only 15 participants that completed the entire research. This represented 71.4% of the pool of participants.

Another limiting factor related to the participant pool was when the research was conducted. The research was conducted in April and May of the 2021 school year. Following the chaotic year of education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many principals and assistant principals were involved in the overall leadership and management of their respective school buildings. There were two potential participants that declined participation due to the study being conducted during the state mandated testing that required the principals and assistant principals to be the building level administrators for test implementation. They stated they lacked the time to commit to being a vital participant in the study.

Limiting the geographical area within the parameters of the study was also another limitation placed on the research. This study was conducted in the very rural part of Northwestern Pennsylvania, where most of the local school districts employ a limited number of principals and assistant principals. There were only two school districts out of the eight, within the participant pool, that employed assistant principals. This limited the study by having limited number of available participants.

Within the confines of the research survey and interview, there was one limitation that could be noted. Question 8 within the interview portion of the study appeared to confuse many of the participants. The question stated, *“In general, what are your parents’ attitudes towards students in the general education placement?”* The confusion within this question was whether the question was discussing parents of special education students’ attitudes towards special education students being included in the general education placement, or parents’ attitudes of regular education students towards special education students being included in the regular education classroom. Participants answered this question in various responses which limited the outcomes of the data relating to the attitudes of parents.

Finally, another limitation to this particular study was that 81.25% of participants stated that they were identified as the LEA in less than 25% of IEP meetings. The district participants have dedicated individuals who are specifically assigned to be the LEA for students with disabilities and have certification in the area of Supervisor of Special Education. This limits the participants’ role in determining the LRE for students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

There is a vast area of expansion in relation to future studies in the area of determining the LRE for students with disabilities. Specifically, from this study, further research would need to dive into the particulars surrounding how principals and the LRE is determined once the student’s IEP is created and how that decision is made. It was determined that principals and assistant principals focus on the needs of the students but lack the ability to articulate how the determination is made once the needs of the student are developed into the student’s IEP. This research could set the stage for development of an educational placement rubric or a determining factors tool to be used in making educational placements for students. While this placement is

the IEP team's decision, the LEA bears the responsibility to ensure that the overall needs of the student can be met in that placement.

A second recommendation for future studies in this area is to determine what background knowledge is required for individuals in the role of principal or assistant principal to possess in the area of special education to be an effective leader. Leaders in the school must have overall knowledge in all areas to be an effective leader. The area of special education is no different. Within the state of Pennsylvania, principals and assistant principals can fulfill the role of LEA, but from this particular study the data reflects a lack of fundamental knowledge in the area. This future research could lead to change in principal preparatory programs at the collegiate level. Also, the research could lead to enhanced requirement for individuals to receive principal certification. Within this research, a component of the PA Inspired Leadership (PIL) Program should be examined to give recommendations for professional development opportunities and enhancements within the program to better assist principals and assistant principals in meeting the demands of special education.

A third recommendation for future research would be to determine the needed staffing to run an effective inclusionary program for individuals with disabilities. This research showed staffing as being one of the main barriers that principals stated as hindering their abilities to have a successful inclusionary program. Researching effective inclusionary programs and determining the needed staffing would help guide school districts in ensuring that students with disabilities are educated in the LRE. With no parameters connected to the number of students served in general education classes, school districts make educated guesses on staffing which most likely doesn't meet the overall needs of the students due to budgetary constraints

implemented from the district level. Data suggesting how successful inclusionary programs could help guide these decisions and ultimately better meet the needs of the students in the LRE.

A final recommendation for future studies would be to compare attitudes of general education teachers in school districts where they have successfully implemented inclusion against general education teachers who currently do not have inclusionary programs implemented. This research could provide guidance on how the overall attitudes of general education teachers impact the successful implementation of inclusion within schools and how it directly relates to determining the LRE for students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

The final results of the study indicate an overwhelming need to increase the professional development in the area of special education for leaders of schools. The basic fundamental special education knowledge is the key factor in determining an effective special education leader in any school capacity. By implementing effective, in-depth special education professional development for leaders, the capacity to then lead change within their buildings would be effective. When leaders lack the fundamental capacity to fully understand special education and its implications, leading change within their facilities is often met with challenges and barriers that these leaders do not fully understand, therefore change is resisted. Furthermore, professional development in the area of implementing inclusionary practices is necessary to ensure that principals and assistant principals have the capacity to lead initiatives such as inclusion with their individual buildings.

Determining the LRE for any student with disabilities is the key factor in determining the success of that student during their school career. The need to build capacity for all educators in the area of special education is at a pivotal moment in education. When school districts are

being overwhelmed with due process cases and challenges to special education placement, the time is now to build great leaders of districts in the area of special education.

## References

*About Universal Design for Learning*. CAST. (2021, April 20).

<https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

ADA National Network. (2020, June 24). Retrieved June 24, 2020, from <https://adata.org/>

Alquraini, T. A. (2013). An analysis of legal issues relating to the least restrictive environment standards. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 13(2), 152–158. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-3802.2011.01220.x

Alsarawi, A. (2019). A process, framework, and set of tools for facilitating co-planning among co-teacher. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*. 15(2), 1-23.

Bateman, D. & Bateman, F. (2002). The principals' impact on the implementation of inclusion. Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ED473828)

Bateman, D., & Bateman, C. F. (2014). *A principal's guide to special education*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Bateman, D., Wysocki, T.A., Gervais, A. & Cline, J.L. (2017). Special education competencies for principals. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*. 30(1). 48-56.

Brock, M. (2018). Trends in the education placement of students with intellectual disability in the United States over the past 40 years. *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 123, 305-314

Carson, C. (2015). Rethinking special education's least restrictive environment requirement. *Michigan Law Review*, 113, 1397–1426.

Casalaspi, D. (2017). The making of a “legislative miracle”: The elementary and secondary education act of 1965. *History of Education Quarterly*. 57(2), 247-277.  
doi:10.1017/heq.2017.4

- Council for Exceptional Children. (2020). Retrieved June 23, 2020, from <https://www.cec.sped.org/>
- Cramer, E. (2015). Shifting least restrictive environments in a large urban school district. *Journal of Urban Learning Teaching and Research, 11*, 40–49.
- Davis, W. (2001). An analysis of principals' formal training in special education. *Project Innovation, 101*, 89-94
- Every Student Succeeds Act. (2015). H. Rept. 114-354 (Conference Report). Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177/text>
- Franzese, M., & Luliano, A. (2019). Correlation analysis. Retrieved July 03, 2020, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/correlation-analysis>
- Garrison-Wade, D.F. (2005). Principals' training or lack of training in special education: A literature review [Review].
- Hanley, T. (2015). *Principals' experiences with special education* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Northeastern University
- Hofreiter, D. (2017). *Principal preparation in special education: building an inclusive culture* (Publication No. 10285190) [Doctoral Dissertation, Mount Saint Mary's College]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Klein, A. (2020, April 02). No Child Left Behind Overview: Definitions, Requirements, Criticisms, and More. Retrieved July 15, 2020, from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overviewdefinition-summary.html>
- Kurth, J. A., Ruppard, A. L., Toews, S. G., McCabe, K. M., Mcqueston, J. A., & Johnston, R. (2019). Considerations in placement decisions for students with extensive support needs:

- an analysis of LRE statements. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 44(1), 3–19. doi: 10.1177/1540796918825479
- Law Insider. (n.d.). Retrieved November 05, 2020, from <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/educational-placement>
- Levin, S., & Bradley, K. (2019, May 19). Understanding and addressing principal turnover: A review of the research. *Learning Policy Institute*.  
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/nassp-understanding-addressing-principal-turnover-review-research-report>.
- Lightner, L. (2020, June 04). Least restrictive environment in special education {A beginner's guide to LRE}. Retrieved June 25, 2020, from <https://adayinourshoes.com/iep-lre-least-restrictive-environment/>
- McGovern, M. (2015). Least restrictive environment: fulfilling the promises of IDEA. *Widener Law Review*, 21, 117–137.
- McLeskey, J., Landers, E., Hoppey, D., Williamson, P. (2011). Learning disabilities and the LRE mandate: An examination of national and state trends. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 26(2), 60-66
- Moore, J.E. (1979). Impact of the 504 regulations. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 45(2), 81-84
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, part of the U.S. Department of Education*. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education. (2021). <https://nces.ed.gov/>.
- Parker, D. (n.d.). Role of LEA representative in IEP meetings: Supporting CCR IEPs. *Association of Wisconsin School Administrators*.
- Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2001, July 1). *Placement Options for Special Education*

Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2020). Retrieved November 5, 2020.

[www.education.pa.gov](http://www.education.pa.gov)

Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network. (2018, October). *Parent Guide to Special Education*

Prager, S. (2014). An "IDEA" to consider: adopting a uniform test to evaluate compliance with the IDEA's least restrictive environment mandate. *New York School Law Review*, 59, 653–678.

Professional Development Definition. (2013, August 29). Retrieved November 05, 2020, from <https://www.edglossary.org/professional-development/>

Profiles of USA Public Schools. (2020). Retrieved July 16, 2020, from

<https://www.publicschoolreview.com/>

Roberts, M.B. & Guerra, F.R. (2017,). Principals' perceptions of their knowledge in special education. *Current Issues in Education*, 20(1)

Roth, H. (2014). The right to special education in Pennsylvania: A guide for parents and advocates. *Education Law Center*

Salisbury, C. (2006). Principals' perspectives on inclusive elementary schools. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 31, 70-82

Salisbury, C.L., & McGregor, G. (2002). The administrative climate and context of inclusive elementary schools. *Exceptional Children*, 68(2). 259-274

Samuels, C. (2018). The important role principals play in special education. *Education Week*. 38(9). 26-28.

Schechter, C. & Feldman, N. (2019). The principal's role in professional learning community in a special education school servicing pupils with autism. *Journal of Special Education*

*Leadership*, 32(1), 17-28

Sec. 300.114 LRE requirements. (2017, May 03). Retrieved July 16, 2020, from

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.114>

Sumbera, M. J., Pazey, B. L., & Lashley, C. (2014). How building principals made sense of free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 13(3), 297–333. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2014.922995

Taylor, S. J. (2004). Caught in the continuum: a critical analysis of the principle of the least restrictive environment. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 29(4), 218-230.

Templeton, R.R. (2017). Special education leadership at the elementary school level: How does knowledge influence leadership?. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*. 30(1). 19-30

Thompson, C. (2015). The principals' impact on the implementation of inclusion. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education*. 136-141

Tracy, S.J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved November 05, 2020, from

<https://www.ed.gov/race-top/district-competition/definitions>

US Legal, I. (2019). Mainstreaming [Education] Law and Legal Definition. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://definitions.uslegal.com/m/mainstreaming-education/>

Webster, J. (2019, February 16). General education: the education everyone should be provided.

Retrieved November 05, 2020, from

<https://www.thoughtco.com/general-education-glossary-term-3110863>

What is Inclusion? An Introduction from Special Education Guide. (2013, August 10). Retrieved

July 16, 2020, from <https://www.specialeducationguide.com/pre-k-12/inclusion/>

What is the definition of disability under the ADA? (2020, October 30). Retrieved November 05,

2020, from <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>

Whitworth, J. (1994). *The regular education initiative: A blueprint for success*. Henderson, TN:

Freed-Hardeman University. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED370327)

Your Dictionary. (2020). Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://www.yourdictionary.com/>

Zagona, A., Miller, A., Kurth, J., & Love, H. (2019). Parent perspectives on special education services: How do schools implement team decisions? *School Community Journal, 29*(2), 105-128.

**APPENDIX A**

<b>Research Questionnaire</b>	
<b>Section 1 - Demographics</b>	
<p>1. Gender</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Male</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Female</li> </ul>	<p>6. Teaching Certification(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> General Education</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Special Education</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Both</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Other</li> </ul>
<p>2. Age</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> 25-34</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 35-44</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 45-54</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 55-64</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 64+</li> </ul>	<p>7. Approximate number of college courses in special education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> 0</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 1-3</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 4-9</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 10+</li> </ul>
<p>3. Years in Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> &lt;1-5</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 6-10</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 11-15</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 16-20</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 21-25</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 26-30</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 30+</li> </ul>	<p>8. Approximate number of in-service hours focused on inclusive practices or general least restrictive environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> 0</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 1-5</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 6-10</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 11-15</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 16-20</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 20+</li> </ul>
<p>4. Position</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Principal</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Assistant Principal</li> </ul>	<p>9. Number of Special Education students in your building(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> 0-50</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 51-100</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 101-150</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 151-200</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 201-250</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 250+</li> </ul>
<p>5. Years as a Principal/Assistant Principal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> &lt;1-5</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 6-10</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 11-15</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 16-20</li> </ul>	<p>10. Approximate number of IEP meetings per year in which you are the LEA in the meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Less than 10%</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 10%-25%</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 21-25</li> <li>○ 26-30</li> <li>○ 30+</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 26%-50%</li> <li>○ 51%-75%</li> <li>○ 76%-100%</li> </ul>
<p><b>Section 2 – Attitudes toward inclusion</b></p>	
<p>11. General education teachers have the background knowledge to provide sufficient educational services to students with disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>	<p>16. Students without disabilities can benefit from contact with disabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>
<p>12. My school makeup is designed to meet the needs of all students with disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>	<p>17. An inclusive classroom lowers the expectations for general education students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>
<p>13. My school has the resources in place to meet the needs of all students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>	<p>18. In general, students with disabilities should be placed in special education classes to better meet their individual needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>
<p>14. At times, students with disabilities distract students without disabilities from the learning process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>	<p>19. General education curriculum and programs should be adapted to meet the needs of all students including students with disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Completely Disagree</li> <li>○ Somewhat Disagree</li> <li>○ Neutral</li> <li>○ Somewhat Agree</li> <li>○ Completely Agree</li> </ul>

<p>15. My district provides adequate time for training on inclusion of students with disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Completely Disagree</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Neutral</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Completely Agree</li> </ul>	<p>20. Students with intellectual disabilities (generally IQ below 70) should not be included in core content general education classrooms. Their instruction should take place in the special education classes to better meet their ability levels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Completely Disagree</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Neutral</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Completely Agree</li> </ul>
---	---

<p><b>Section 3 – Hypothetical questions in determining least restrictive environment</b></p>	
<p>21. After completing a reevaluation, the school psychologist determined that the student met criteria for a student with an intellectual disability. The LEA made the recommendation to the parents that due to the determination of an intellectual disability the best educational placement would be in the intermediate unit's Life Skills classroom. Did the school district offer FAPE in the LRE? Please explain your answer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> YES - _____</li> <li><input type="radio"/> NO - _____</li> </ul>	
<p>22. A student enrolled over the summer with a history of a learning disability. At the enrollment meeting the parent requested a reevaluation to occur. The principal informed the parent that the reevaluation could not be initiated until the start of the new school year. Was the principal correct in his statement? Please explain your answer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> YES - _____</li> <li><input type="radio"/> NO - _____</li> </ul>	
<p>23. Due to safety concerns an elementary building was closed and the students were moved from one elementary school to another. Parents of a student with an intellectual disability demanded that they have a meeting. They are stating that there was an educational placement change with their child and they will be filing a due process complaint. Were the parents correct? Please explain why you chose your answer.</p>	

YES - \_\_\_\_\_

NO - \_\_\_\_\_

24. At a recent IEP meeting the IEP discussed the least restrictive environment for their child and determined that the student could remain in regular education as long as the child received an extra 20 minutes of Title I support 3 x's per week. A revision was conducted placing the Title I support in the IEP. Two nine weeks have passed and due to scheduling conflicts, the Title I support was unable to happen. The parent contacted the principal who stated that since Title I doesn't coincide with Chapter 14 regulations there shouldn't be any concern or need to make up those hours that were missed. Was the principal correct in his statements? Please explain why you choose your answer.

YES - \_\_\_\_\_

NO - \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**

<b>Interview Questionnaire</b>	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Responses/Anecdotal Notes</b>
1. What do you find as the most challenging aspect of determining the least restrictive environment for the children in your building?	
2. What do you find as the most challenging aspect of implementing IEPs in the least restrictive environment?	
What are the largest hurdles that you need to overcome with the general education teachers in order to provide an excellent inclusionary program?	
How has your building transformed toward inclusion since your tenure in the building?	
What are the holes currently in your program in relation to providing education in the least restrictive environment?	
What process does your school follow when determining the least restrictive environment for a student with a disability?	
What are the challenges you face with your special education staff in accordance with	

<p>providing services in the least restrictive environment?</p>	
<p>In general, what are your parents' attitudes towards students in the general education placement?</p>	
<p>What do you feel is the best aspect of your school and their ability to service individuals with disabilities?</p>	

## APPENDIX C



TO: Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey  
Special Education

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James A. Preston".

FROM: James A. Preston, D.Ed., Vice Chairperson  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

DATE: April 13, 2021

RE: Approval Pending Receipt of Modifications

Protocol #: 2021-064-88-B

Protocol Title: Principal's Perspectives in Determining the Least  
Restrictive Environment for Students with Disabilities in  
Rural Northwestern Pennsylvania Schools

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Slippery Rock University has received and reviewed the requested modifications for the above-referenced protocol and requires the additional information and modifications *before* approval can be granted:

1. Use the consent form/format on the IRB website. The consent form should have the specific headings listed in the template. Follow instructions on the first page.
2. Correct typo in the first sentence of consent form: "it" to "is."

**Please include a memo detailing how you have addressed the required changes including the name of the principal investigator, the protocol number and the protocol title. Also, include a copy of the protocol with any changes to the original protocol highlighted. Please include two copies of the consent form (if applicable), one with any changes highlighted and the other should be a final version to be stamped and returned to you.**

Please contact the IRB Office by phone at (724)738-4846 or via email at [irb@sru.edu](mailto:irb@sru.edu) if you have any questions.

