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Principals Could Use More Support to Help Students with Disabilities—Especially in Schools Serving Mostly Students of Color

Principals play a critical role in ensuring that teachers are prepared to support the nation's 6.7 million students with disabilities (SWD).[1] When teachers are better supported, they are better equipped to provide quality education and equitable learning opportunities for SWD.[2] Unfortunately, recent national surveys show that both general and special education teachers feel that they lack support for serving SWD.[3] Little is known about the supports for SWD that principals receive from their districts and other sources, but, as with teachers, principals report feeling inadequately prepared to support SWD. According to a recent survey of more than 3,529 principals, only 12 percent reported that, when they began working as principals, they felt completely prepared to support the needs of SWD.[4] Findings from a web-based survey administered to the RAND Corporation's American School Leader Panel include the following:

- Most principals—especially principals of schools serving primarily students of color—believe that their schools could do a better job supporting SWD.
- Principals of schools with more students of color reported having less-sufficient access to supports for serving SWD.

Most Principals, Especially Principals Serving Primarily Students of Color, Believe That Their Schools Could Better Support SWD

Almost 80 percent of principals somewhat or strongly agreed that their schools could do a better job supporting SWD. The percentage of principals agreeing with this statement was higher among principals of schools

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[1] DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019; Bateman and Bateman, 2014; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2009.
[2] Bettini, Crockett, Brownell, and Merrill, 2016; McLeskey and Waldron, 2011.
[3] Galiatsos, Kruse, and Whittaker, 2019; Stelitano, Perera, and Johnston, 2019.
[4] Johnston and Young, 2019.

The Learning Together Survey asked a nationally representative sample of 1,679 principals a variety of questions, including questions about the extent to which they have sufficient support for serving SWD. The survey asked them to rate their level of agreement with the following statement:

We could do a better job supporting our students with disabilities.

Options for responses were *strongly agree*, *somewhat agree*, *somewhat disagree*, and *strongly disagree*.

The survey also asked principals the following questions:

How sufficient is your access to each of the following for helping you support students with disabilities in the current school year (2018–2019)?

Principals rated their access to the following types of support, including:

- district leadership support (e.g., key information and guidance from district administrators)
- materials and tools (e.g., curricula, activities, technology, modified texts)
- staff with specific expertise within or outside their school
- training and information (e.g., professional development, books).

Options for rating the sufficiency of each type of support were as follows: *did not receive, completely insufficient, somewhat insufficient, somewhat sufficient,* and *completely sufficient.* We selected the four types of support because they had been revealed as specific areas of need for teachers to better serve SWD in a recent nationally representative survey.[1] We administered the survey to principals serving students in grades 6 through 12 in an effort to understand the unique issues facing secondary schools; challenges to appropriately supporting teachers and serving SWD at the secondary level have been well established.[2] The survey also collected demographic information about principals (e.g., length of time served as a principal, race, gender) and schools (e.g., student racial demographics, percentage of SWD), which we used to explore subgroup differences.

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[1] Stelitano, Perera, and Johnston, 2019.
[2] Principals were included in the survey if their schools served any grades from 6 through 12; Dieker and Murawski, 2003; Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2001.

serving primarily students of color than among principals of schools serving mostly white students (Figure 1).[5] Ninety percent of principals in schools serving the highest percentage of students of color somewhat or strongly agreed with this statement, compared with only 69 percent of principals in schools serving the lowest percentage of students of color. This difference of 21 percentage points was statistically significant in a multivariate model, even after controlling for school poverty level, urbanicity, district size, school size, and years of experience.

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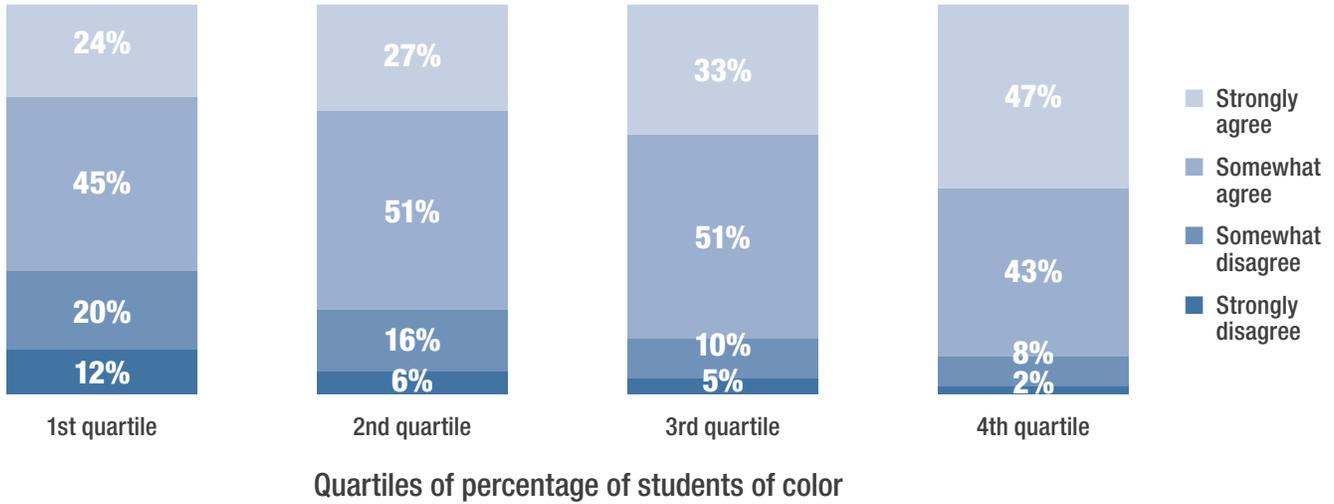[5] We use *students of color* to refer to black and Latino students.

The Majority of Principals Could Use More Support for Serving SWD

For the four types of support addressed in the survey, only about one-quarter of principals rated their support as "completely sufficient" (Figure 2). Among these four types of support, principals were slightly more likely to report that they had completely sufficient support from district leadership, including key information and guidance from district administrators. They were slightly less likely to feel completely supported in access to training and information,

FIGURE 1

Principals in Schools with More Students of Color Were More Likely to Indicate That They Could Do More to Support SWD

Percentages of Principal Agreement with the Statement "*We Could Do a Better Job Supporting Our Students with Disabilities.*"

Response	1st quartile	2nd quartile	3rd quartile	4th quartile
Strongly agree	24%	27%	33%	47%
Somewhat agree	45%	51%	51%	43%
Somewhat disagree	20%	16%	10%	8%
Strongly disagree	12%	6%	5%	2%

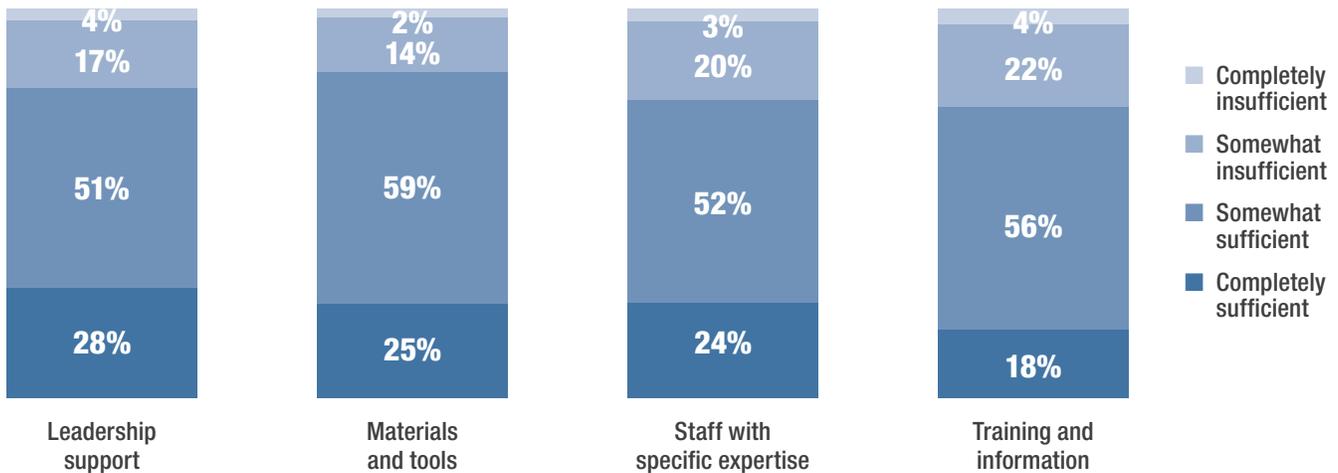**Quartiles of percentage of students of color**

NOTES: Chi-square tests of differences among school leaders in schools with different percentages of students of color were statistically significant (*p* < 0.001). The first quartile includes schools with 0 to 8.5 percent students of color; the second quartile includes schools with 8.5 to 28.0 percent students of color; the third quartile includes schools with 28.1 to 69.1 students of color; and the fourth quartile includes schools with 69.2 percent or more students of color. Some numbers do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

FIGURE 2

Principals Were Slightly More Likely to Report Completely Sufficient Support From District Leadership

Principals' Perceptions of Sufficiency of Supports for Serving SWD

Response	Leadership support	Materials and tools	Staff with specific expertise	Training and information
Completely insufficient	4%	2%	3%	4%
Somewhat insufficient	17%	14%	20%	22%
Somewhat sufficient	51%	59%	52%	56%
Completely sufficient	28%	25%	24%	18%

NOTE: Some numbers do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

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FIGURE 3

Principals with More Students of Color Perceived Less Support in All Areas

Principal Reporting of "Completely Sufficient" Support, by School Racial Composition
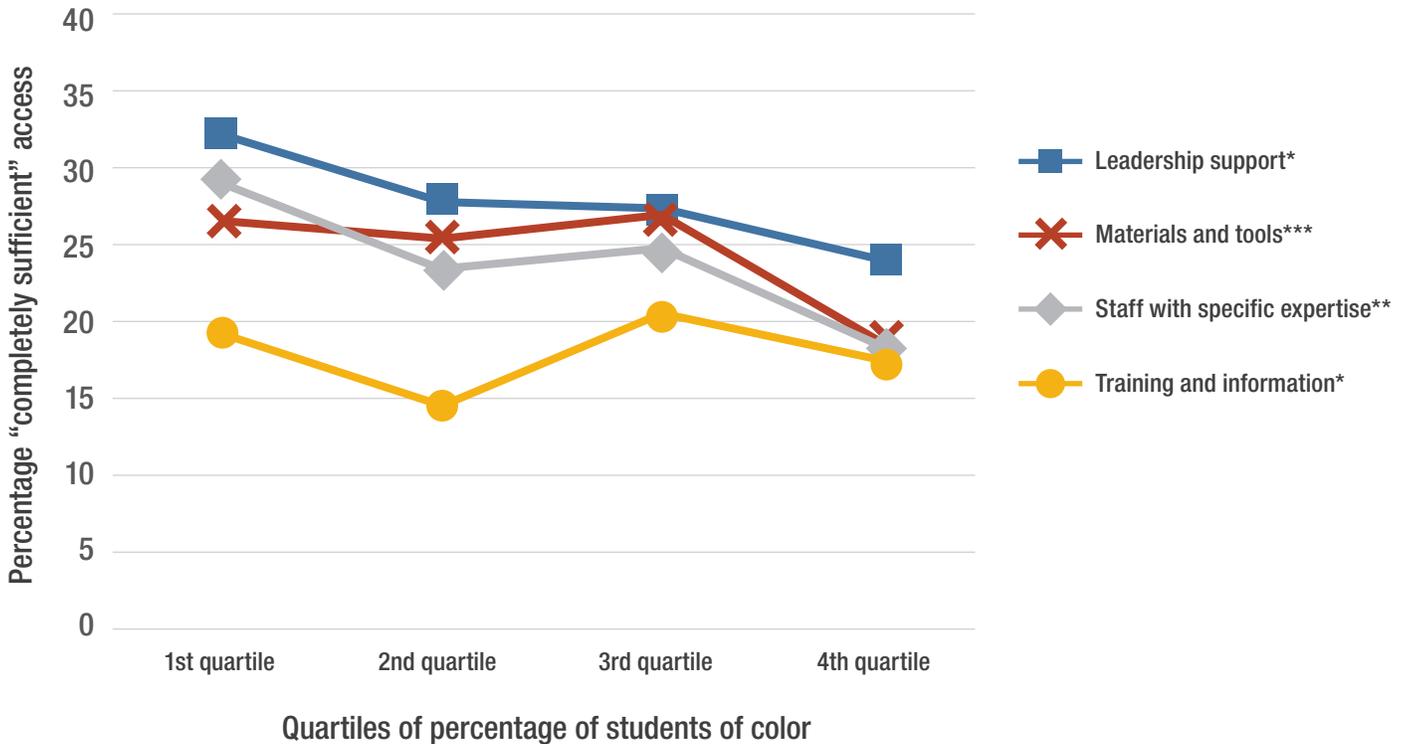
NOTE: Asterisks indicate that the associations between survey responses and school demographic composition are statistically significant based on a weighted linear regression; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

such as professional development and books. For all types of support, majorities of principals reported that support was "somewhat sufficient" (between 51 and 59 percent); fewer reported that it was "somewhat insufficient" (between 14 and 22 percent) or "completely insufficient" (between 2 and 4 percent).

Principals Working with More Students of Color Reported Less Access to Supports for Serving SWD

Principals working in schools with the highest percentage of students of color were significantly less likely to report having "completely sufficient"

support for serving SWD for each of the four types of support measured (Figure 3). The largest discrepancies in principals' reports of support were in the areas of district leadership support, access to materials and tools, and access to staff with specific expertise within or outside the school. Compared with principals serving the lowest percentages of students of color (first quartile), principals serving the highest percentages of students of color (fourth quartile) were between 8 and 11 percentage points less likely to report having completely sufficient support. These differences were statistically significant for materials and tools in a multivariate model, even after controlling for school poverty level, urbanicity, district size, school size, and principal's race/ethnicity and years of experience.

Why Might Student Racial Demographics Relate to Principals' Reported Access to Supports?

Survey findings show that even when controlling for district, teacher, and school-level factors (including school poverty level and urbanicity), student racial demographics remain associated with principals' perceived sufficiency of support for serving SWD. Exploring discrepancies in support for special education affecting students of color is critical, given the established history of educational inequalities facing students of color. Although the survey data do not allow us to fully explore why this discrepancy exists, we offer several hypotheses from previous research.

It is well documented that students of color are disproportionately identified as having disabilities.[6] This disproportionate identification could be driven by such factors as test bias, poverty, special education eligibility processes, inequities in general education, and inequities in behavior management.[7] Therefore, schools serving higher percentages of students of color likely include higher percentages of SWD. We found that this trend held true for our nationally representative sample of principals; those who worked in schools with higher percentages of students of color were significantly more likely to serve higher percentages of SWD. Principals of schools serving higher percentages of students of color might require more support as they strive to support higher percentages of SWD.

Above and beyond these factors, the challenges facing students of color could be exacerbated by their principals having less support in general. Funding and resource discrepancies have been well documented for districts and schools serving high percentages of students of color.[8] This might explain, in part, why principals in these schools report significantly less access to leadership support, materials and tools, training and information, and access to staff with specific expertise for serving

SWD. Furthermore, schools with a higher percentage of students of color have difficulty attracting and retaining quality principals,[9] which could be driving turnover and new principals' reported needs for more support.

Discussion

The majority of secondary school principals believed that their schools could be doing a better job supporting SWD and reported having less than completely sufficient support for serving SWD in their schools. Previous research highlighted these types of support—leadership support, access to materials and tools, and training and information—as lacking among teachers, especially high school teachers.[10] The findings from this survey suggest that secondary school principals might themselves lack guidance for supporting their teachers to serve SWD. Principals of schools serving primarily students of color were significantly more likely to report that their schools could do a better job supporting SWD and that their access to support for serving SWD was less than sufficient. Although school racial demographics, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity often are correlated, we found that student racial demographics remained a significant predictor of principals' access to materials and tools to support SWD and beliefs that their schools could do a better job supporting SWD.

There are several important limitations to keep in mind when interpreting these findings. First, the survey only conveys the perspectives of *secondary* school principals, not *elementary* school principals. Second, this survey measures principals' self-reporting and does not provide an outside perspective of supports received or how well principals serve SWD in their schools. Third, our definitions of types of support and our definition of SWD are both very broad. It is likely that there are other areas in which principals have more- or less-sufficient support, and the survey items do not ask about specific needs (e.g., types of training or materials) or support for specific types of disabilities. Both of these topics

[6] Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera, 2011; Dunn, 1968; Harry and Klingner, 2014.

[7] Skiba et al., 2008.

[8] Darling-Hammond, 2013; Morgan and Amerikaner, 2018.

[9] Beckett, 2018; Béteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb, 2012.

[10] Stelitano, Perera, and Johnston, 2019.

could yield important and actionable insights. Finally, the survey data do not allow further exploration into the discrepancy in support perceived by principals of schools serving mostly students of color. In our nationally representative sample, principals of schools serving mostly students of color were more likely to serve higher percentages of SWD. Gaining a better understanding of the supports required for leaders in these schools, as well as of the systemic factors that influence the educational opportunities of students of color who are identified as SWD, are important steps for clarifying policy interventions. Finally, principals' support for serving SWD is certainly not the only factor affecting the quality of educational opportunities that students are ultimately afforded. Among other factors, principals' attitudes about SWD, previous personal experiences with SWD, and preservice training regarding SWD

might affect the extent to which SWD are prioritized in their schools and are afforded quality and equitable learning opportunities.[11]

Despite limitations, these results suggest that district, state, and federal policymakers striving to improve outcomes and supports for SWD should examine supports provided to secondary school principals. Specifically, policymakers could benefit from learning more from principals about particular needs for district leadership support and access to expertise, materials, and training (as well as other needs for support not covered in this survey). Additional research into this topic—and into the discrepancies of support reported by principals of schools serving mostly students of color—are needed to inform future improvements.

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[11] Cook, Semmel, and Gerber, 1999; DeArmond et al., 2019.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

To compare responses for principals in schools with different demographic profiles, we created four categories of schools based on the schools' percentage of students of color.

Our analysis of principals' access to resources for supporting SWD consisted of three steps. First, we estimated weighted frequency tabulations to determine the percentage of principals working in each of the aforementioned school quartiles who indicated that they had "completely sufficient" access. Second, we estimated weighted linear regression models in which the outcome measures were the survey questions and the sole predictor variable was the ordered categorical variable indicating each principal's quartile for percentage of students of color. This weighted regression allowed us to assess the directionality and statistical significance of the association between the survey responses and the demographic composition of the principals' schools. Third, we conducted supplemental analyses to ensure that differences by school demographics were not driven by other school characteristics or differences in the principals' backgrounds and levels of experience. In these analyses, we controlled for a limited set of covariates that included indicators for school poverty level (based on percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch), urbanicity (urban versus nonurban), district size, school size, and principal's race/ethnicity and years of experience.

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About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public school teachers and leaders who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences were invaluable to this effort and helped us better understand how to support their hard work in schools. We also thank our reviewers, Elaine Wang, Robin Lake, and Susan Strauss, for helpful feedback that improved this report.

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