

OPTIMISE: Special Education Administrator Credentials Workgroup

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Introduction

For over two decades, the gap in appropriately trained special education administrators has impacted the educational landscape, echoing the sentiments expressed by Lashley and Boscardin (2003). The critical need for well-prepared leaders in special education has not only persisted but has become increasingly urgent, amplifying the call for comprehensive solutions to bridge this gap.

Michigan, recognizing the significance of specialized leadership in special education, took a step in 1979 by including specific requirements for special education administrative credentials within the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE). Within the framework of MARSE, Michigan outlined a two-tier credential system comprising the special education director (R140.1771) and the special education supervisor (R140.1772).

These distinct tiers underscored the nature of responsibilities within special education leadership, delineating clear expectations for professionals aspiring to guide and shape the future of special education in Michigan. The decision to create these specific credential categories reflected Michigan's commitment to ensuring specialized knowledge of special education's unique challenges and opportunities.

Moreover, Michigan stood out among the states with its rigorous competencies and elevated expectations for special education administrators, as underscored by Boscardin et al. (2010). Michigan set the bar high for those becoming special education administrators. This commitment to excellence aimed to foster a cadre of leaders capable of navigating the complex landscape of special education.

Per the Michigan Revised School Code, there is a clear mandate for all intermediate school districts to appoint a director of special education who meets the specific qualifications and requirements stipulated by the rules promulgated by the superintendent of public instruction ([R380.1711](#)). This statutory provision underscores the importance of adhering to rigorous standards for those in special education administrator positions.

These efforts of 44 years ago were admirable, yet today, the world of special education reflects the ongoing shortages of appropriately trained special education administrators in Michigan. This signals a need for evaluation, modifications, and strategic intervention

to ensure more well-prepared special education administrators. Stakeholders, educators, policymakers, and the broader community must unite to refine existing strategies, explore solutions, and ensure a pipeline of qualified leaders in special education.

Barriers

A workgroup embarked to reveal the challenges underlying the shortage of special education administrators. With many decades of collective experience in the field, the workgroup set out to identify the key factors contributing to the shortage.

As the workgroup delved into credentialing, one prominent factor emerged: the disparity between the requirements for special education and general education administrator credentials. Educators seeking a special education administrator credential must also hold a Michigan central office endorsement or an elementary/secondary administrator K-12 endorsement. This additional requirement can be burdensome for educators who only wish to act as special education administrators. Further, the current MARSE rule and Revised School Code need to be aligned and are actually duplicative of each other.

The workgroup discovered that the options for credentialing in special education administration were increasingly scarce, with a noticeable decline in the number of programs available at higher education institutions. This scarcity hinders aspiring administrators from acquiring the necessary expertise and contributes to a dwindling pool of qualified special education leaders.

Special education administrators in Michigan face a unique challenge in their credentialing process. Compared to other educational leadership roles, no alternate route is available to navigate the process efficiently. The geography of the State of Michigan hinders access to traditional credentialing programming, especially for educators in the upper peninsula of Michigan. Small rural districts, such as those in many portions of Michigan, are particularly impacted by the need for credentialed special education administrators.

The workgroup discovered the current prevalent practice of appointing district leaders for special education who are often building principals or other uncredentialed administrators. While a pragmatic response to the shortage, this raised concerns about the quality and depth of leadership in special education, indicating the need for alternative certification. The absence of specialized credentials in these crucial roles undermines the effectiveness of initiatives and support systems for students with special needs.

Financial constraints and logistical challenges compound the barriers to obtaining a special education administrator credential. Traditional credentialing options present a formidable hurdle, with some programs costing upwards of \$35,000 to obtain the necessary credentials. This financial burden can dissuade potential candidates and limit the diversity of professionals entering the field. Moreover, the lack of virtual access to instruction further exacerbates the issue, making it challenging for individuals, especially those already employed, to pursue these credentials. The demands of conventional programs, combined with the difficulty for districts to afford release time for current staff seeking special education administrator credentials, create a significant impediment to cultivating a qualified and diverse cadre of leaders in special education.

The landscape of special education administration is facing a notable challenge due to a surge in retirements and substantial attrition among administrators. Current data reveals that a significant proportion of special education administrators, exemplified by over half of the current Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE) members, are within their initial 1-3 years in the role.

The increase in retirements not only represents a loss of institutional knowledge but also poses a barrier to the continuity and stability of special education programs. Addressing this issue becomes imperative for ensuring a seamless leadership transition and sustaining the quality of special education services for students with diverse learning needs. Efforts to attract, prepare, and retain special education administrators are crucial in mitigating the impact of this significant attrition.

Recommendations

The workgroup emphasizes the need to draw highly skilled individuals to special education leadership roles. Acknowledging the pivotal role played by a robust leadership cadre, the workgroup recommends creating an environment that attracts, retains, and prepares individuals committed to championing the cause of special education. The overarching goal is to cast a wide net, inviting diverse talents to contribute to the field. These recommendations are all founded on the [Standards for the Preparation and Practice of Special Education Administrators](#) adopted by the Michigan State Board of Education.

These recommendations fall within a framework that supports all students and educators in the general education setting and enhances their significance and impact. By emphasizing the inclusive nature of these measures, the focus broadens beyond special education administrators alone, extending to benefit the entire educational ecosystem.

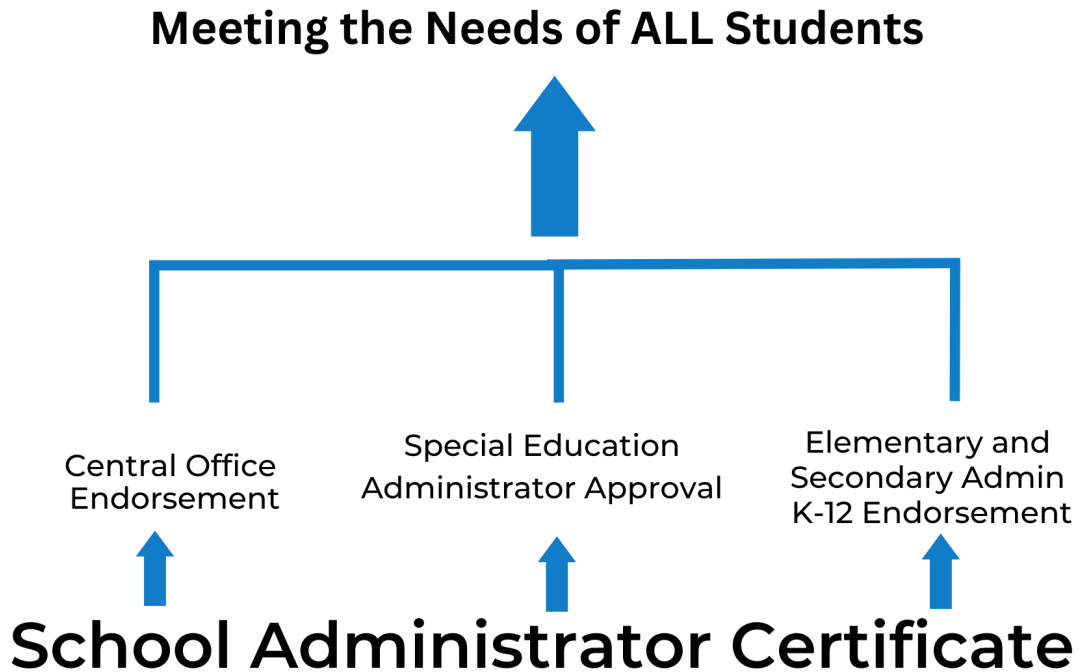
1. *Revise and combine MARSE [R 340.1771 and 340.1772](#) into one special education administrator credential.*

Within the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE), revise rules R340.1771 and R340.1772 that prescribe the preparation and credentialing of the special education supervisor and director to provide for just one special education administrator credential. The Michigan Board of Education Standards of Preparation for the Special Education Administrator was adopted in 2020 and defined the skills and knowledge for this position. In addition, consider the requirements regarding three years of prerequisite experience and align it with the flexibilities given for other administrative credentials. These factors are linked to budgetary reimbursable costs and do not necessarily ensure a highly qualified special education leader. This recommendation aims to remove unnecessary barriers, providing a more seamless pathway for talented individuals to attain the credentials for special education leadership.

2. *Revise requirements within the [Revised School Code 380.1246](#) to remove the duplicative general education requirement currently associated with a special education administrative credential.*

Establish a credential option for special education administrators that does not necessitate concurrent endorsements in the Central Office or PK-12 credential. This pathway would recognize the unique expertise and specialized knowledge required for effective leadership in special education. By offering a streamlined credential, educational authorities can cater specifically to individuals aspiring to specialize in special education administration, streamlining the process and making it more accessible.

To do this, Michigan should establish an administrative certificate allowing endorsements in three areas. Currently, Central Office and PK-12 are the only options. Special Education Director approval is on top of this other certification. By creating a Special Education Administrator as the third endorsement area and aligning it with the Michigan State Board of Education standards, special education leaders have a rigorous but reasonable path to earning their credentials.



3. *An alternate route for a special education administrator credential.*

Create an alternate route for special education administrator credentialing. An alternate route provides participants with an option for certification outside the standard college preparatory route. A statewide association or other entity typically delivers content through synchronous or asynchronous online modules, in-person learning, or a combination. This is currently provided for Michigan teachers, principals, and superintendents (e.g., T.E.A.C.H. program for teachers, MASA's Horizon Leadership Academy for Administrators). This path is often associated with state continuing education credit hours (SCECHs), not college credit. This would require a MARSE rule waiver (340.1771-1772) or revision to allow for flexibility around credit acquisition. The credits requirement does not align with the current State Board-approved standards, so the minimum requirement of 12-30 credits should be updated within MARSE to reflect mastery of standards rather than completion of credits. The language must also be updated to replace college/university with an approved educator preparation program.

This innovative pathway acknowledges the diverse educational backgrounds from which influential leaders may emerge. By providing an alternate route, this workgroup recognizes the importance of flexibility and accessibility in obtaining

special education administration credentials, enriching the leadership landscape with a broader spectrum of experiences and expertise. The current path is a longer, less flexible and more expensive pathway for special educators. This proposed system is more equitable.

4. *Formal mentoring from a field-based colleague.*

A formal mentoring program is recommended, fostering collaborative professional growth through mentorship from field-based colleagues. This structured mentoring initiative aims to provide guidance, support, and practical insights to emerging special education administrators, enhancing their effectiveness and contributing to the overall elevation of leadership quality in the field. Mentoring is recommended after the special education administrator credential is obtained and an individual is placed in leadership.

This recommendation aligns with section 27(h) of the School Aid Act 2023-2024, which allocates \$50,000,000 in one-time funding focused on mentoring teachers, counselors, and administrators. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has yet to make this grant application available. In alignment with other OPTMISE action team recommendations, we recommend a change in MDE interpretation, or the boilerplate of the Mentoring Grants (Section 27h), to allow for \$3000 per educator annually of the \$25 million portion of the grant “for mentoring to support and retain new teachers, school counselors, and administrators and improve their instructional practices.”

5. *Adopt micro-credentials for non-credentialed building or district leaders.*

Micro-credentials are an innovative way to demonstrate and share your educational competencies. They are job-embedded, competency-based, research-based, and individualized. Implementing micro-credentialing programs for non-special education credentialed building or district leaders represents a strategic and flexible approach to addressing the evolving needs of Michigan districts without fully credentialed special education administrators.

Micro-credentials offer targeted and specialized training in specific competencies, allowing leaders to acquire the necessary skills incrementally. This innovative strategy aligns with the dynamic nature of educational leadership, ensuring that non-credentialed leaders can gain the essential skills and knowledge required for effective decision-making and support in the complex landscape of building or district leadership. Michigan Virtual is one micro-credential provider in the state, partnering with the Michigan Department of Education, Michigan State Police Office of School Safety, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, Michigan State

University, Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, and many others.

The OPTIMISE Working Conditions Action Team recommended the following, which aligns with this recommendation:

“Development and implementation of modules for building leaders specific to IDEA, FAPE, inclusive leadership and specially designed instruction, and related special education topics, including legal foundations, programming and services, discipline, communication and partnering with parents and advocates, etc. Furthermore, we recommend the foundational work from this action team be used by the recipients of the one-time \$5 million SAF allocation of the Special Education Capacity Building (section 27j) “to provide personnel with training on special education processes, including evaluations, instruction, legal requirements, and other topics” to strengthen special education knowledge and skills of building leaders.”

6. *State-funded fellowship program for special educator administrator credentialing.*

Advocating for state funding dedicated to special education administrator credentialing is essential for addressing the barriers and challenges in this critical field. Allocating specific funding for participation in these programs would help alleviate the financial burden on individuals pursuing special education administrator credentials, particularly given the high costs associated with traditional programs. Based on a current review of the Michigan Registry of Education Personnel (REP) report, less than half (43%) of individuals serving as the special education contact for their district have special education supervisor or director approval. This data reflects the significant need to increase the pipeline of educators pursuing this credential.

This fellowship program should be modeled after section 27(a) of the State School Aid Act and allocated \$1,000,000 over 3 years to offset tuition costs. These would be granted to eligible candidates in amounts to be at most \$10,000 per year. The funding would be awarded to the educator preparation program on behalf of the candidate. These recommendations are specific to special education administrators, but we support state funding for the general preparation of school administrators because of the important role leadership plays in attracting, preparing and retaining highly skilled staff.

In synthesizing these elements, the workgroup recommends proactively shaping a professional landscape that is not only streamlined and flexible in credentialing but also

fosters mentorship and continuous development. Collectively, these initiatives will contribute to a more robust and effective special education leadership system in Michigan.

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