

**Examining school administrators' perceived involvement in special education transition services related to promoting post-school success.**

by

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study examines secondary school administrators' perceptions of their roles in special education post-school transition programs and practices as explored through narrative inquiry interviews. Three research questions guided the study: (1) What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as barriers to having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services? (2) What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services? and (3) How do Alabama secondary school administrators describe their role in promoting post-school success? Findings focus on principal and assistant principal involvement, perceptions, knowledge and expertise, and collaborative practices. The study concludes with implications for school administrators and advocates for ongoing collaboration and professional development regarding special education and transition services.

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation is dedicated to my number one supporter, my future husband, Danarius Crayton; my mother, Dr. Alexandria Brice; my (step)dad, Timothy Brice; my two older sisters, Mykeita Trammell and Tasheila Townsend and their husbands; and all of my nieces and nephews, Bryce, Mackenzie, Braxton, and Kyler, and my goddaughter, D'hvani! Thank you for all your love and support throughout this entire process.

To my fiancé, thank you for cheering me on every step of the way. Each time I felt like giving up (or slowing down), you were there to uplift me. I am blessed to have you in my life, and I am so proud to be able to dedicate this to you!

My mother, Dr. Alexandria Brice, has been the most influential person in my life. She has been a constant encourager, supporter, and self-proclaimed “realist” throughout every step of my life, and this Ph. D. is as much for her as for me. She is no stranger to adversity, yet she accomplishes and excels at everything she attempts. She instilled in me the importance of education at a very early age, and I have remembered and kept her lessons near my heart as I progressed through each stage of my own educational journey.

My mother had my eldest sister when she was 17 years old and a senior in high school. Through the guidance of the older family members in her life, she got a job working at a factory, got married, and could have believed those who said that was all that was available for a young mother. Luckily, my mother quickly realized that education breaks generational curses and was the only way to make a better life for her and her 3 girls. My mother would load up her car and take my two older sisters and me two hours away to Troy University with her multiple days per week while she worked very hard to earn her bachelor's degree in education. Shortly after, she went on to earn her master's in education from Auburn University, and in 2017, she and I walked

across the stage together as I received my bachelor's and she received her Ph.D. from Auburn University. Through her selfless work in education, I watched her impact so many children, athletes, young adults, and adults. I hope to be half the educator, advocate, supporter, wife, and mother that she is. I owe all my success to her and the values she has instilled in me from day one.

The fact that I am getting a doctoral degree probably signifies that school has not been extremely difficult for me. Upon beginning my career teaching special education, I quickly realized that that is not the case for so many other students. My students at Opelika High School made such a large impression on me. I spent a great deal of time advocating for them to have equal opportunities to succeed and trying to help them reach their maximum potential. I also quickly realized that the "hand" that everyone is dealt is very different, and the best education is not always accessible for all. As a special education teacher, I was widely responsible for helping to prepare students for their lives after graduating high school, and I always felt as if I was doing a very poor job at appropriately preparing them for their futures. Upon leaving OHS and starting a new job at Auburn University with The EAGLES Program, I quickly learned all that went into encouraging and supporting successful transitions for students and was immediately inspired by the amazing team I was exposed to. Through learning "everything employment" from my amazing partner, Mrs. Lauren Ozment, learning how to give this population of students a choice and a voice from my spirit animal, Dr. Christine Drew, and everything in between, a new spark ignited inside of me! This new spark, coupled with my desire to see all students have access to better post-secondary options, led me to my dissertation topic- how to improve post-secondary transition services for students with disabilities. I hope to see students with disabilities everywhere have better opportunities for employment and higher education after high school. I

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## **List of Abbreviations**

IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Education Plan
IPSE	Inclusive Post-Secondary Education
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
PSEL	Professional Standards for Educational Leaders
WIN	What I Need

## CHAPTER I: NATURE OF THE STUDY

### Introduction

Although life is a never-ending series of transitions, one of the most significant transitions an individual will make is the transition from secondary school to post-secondary life, as it signals the transition into legal adulthood. Adulthood spans from the legal age of majority until the end of life, the longest developmental stage. Legal adulthood may look different for individuals with significant disabilities, as some adults are not granted decision-making power due to guardianship laws. Transition is defined by dictionary.com as “the movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc., to another.” The US Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) defines transition as a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student, is designed to facilitate the student’s movement from secondary school to post-school activities, is based on each individual’s needs, strengths, and interests, and includes instruction, related services, and practice (US Department of Education OSEP, [34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)]). This describes the government-mandated post-secondary transition services that secondary schools provide to their students who receive special education services.

Although success after secondary school looks different for each young adult, some standard indicators of quality of life for adults in the United States include employment, post-secondary education, and independent living (Joswiak, 2021). Students with disabilities experience much poorer post-school outcomes than their peers without disabilities (Haber et al., 2016; Joswiak, 2021). In 2022, 73% of students with disabilities graduated from high school in the state of Alabama, as opposed to 92% of general education graduates (Alabama State

Department of Education, 2022). The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) reported that in 2020, only 39% of working-aged people with an intellectual disability (aged 21-64) who had been out of high school for eight years were gainfully employed, compared to 66% of the general population. When members of this population obtained employment, they often worked fewer hours and earned lower wages. Percentages of individuals with intellectual disabilities obtaining integrated and competitive employment, or jobs held by individuals with disabilities within a standard workplace setting, where most of the other employed individuals do not have disabilities, fell even further behind young adults with other disabilities (Almakay, 2020). Only about 6,000 students with intellectual disabilities are enrolled in approximately 300 universities nationwide (Lee et al., 2021). “Despite federal legislation resulting in nationwide implementation of transition programs, ‘being unemployed’ or ‘underemployed’ continued to exemplify what it truly meant to be disabled” (National Organization on Disability, 1998). These statistics are an unfortunate call to action for ensuring young adults with disabilities have opportunities and access to more rigorous transition programs in high school to help prepare them for improved post-school outcomes (Lee et al., 2021).

At its core, leadership serves to provide direction and exercise influence (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). School administrators are the leaders of their school’s special education programs and should ensure that the specified shared intentions and goals provide equitable access, appropriate expertise, and high-quality programming that will foster meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). School administrators would benefit from knowing the law regulating educational programs for students with disabilities (Moates, 2016). Research indicates that school principals receive very little exposure and training in issues regarding special education during their principal preparation programs. This lack of education

and knowledge creates a barrier to school administrators facilitating and supporting successful transition programs, which are crucial to the post-school success of students receiving special education services in secondary schools. Being a school administrator who prioritizes inclusion means being knowledgeable and compliant with special education laws, policies, and regulations (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

This chapter will provide background information regarding transition services, and barriers and facilitators to administrators supporting successful transition programs in secondary schools will be examined. The problem will be discussed in detail, followed by the purpose of this study. The research will then be described, beginning with the research questions, moving on to the study's design, and finally discussing the significance. I will provide a framework as a reference for the structure of the study, followed by assumptions and limitations.

## **Background**

Over the past thirty years, research regarding post-school outcomes of students with disabilities displayed that improvement is possible when teachers, families, students, and other stakeholders collaborate to highlight and provide experience for students across many different domains. This process is described as transition-focused education (Kohler et al., 2016). Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 is a model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs for secondary students nationwide. This taxonomy provides concrete practices for embedding transition services into educational programs, ultimately guiding students with disabilities into college and careers (Kohler et al., 2016). Each of the five critical components of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning 2.0 aligns with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). The alignment of these two frameworks supports that administrators are an integral and invaluable component in special education

transition services (PSEL, 2015; Kohler et al., 2016). PSEL Standards and Kohler’s Taxonomy, a table illustrating the alignment of the two frameworks, are included in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*PSEL Standards and Kohler’s Taxonomy Alignment*

<b>Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition</b>	<b>PSEL Standard Alignment</b>
<b>Programming 2.0 Component</b>	
Student-Focused Planning	<p><b>MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES</b></p> <p>Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.</p>
Program Structures	<p><b>ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL NORMS</b></p> <p>Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>
Student Development	<p><b>EQUITY AND CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS</b></p> <p>Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>
Student Development Program Structures	<p><b>CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT</b></p> <p>Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s</p>

<b>Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition</b>	<b>PSEL Standard Alignment</b>
<b>Programming 2.0 Component</b>	academic success and well-being.
Interagency Collaboration	<p>COMMUNITY OF CARE AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS</p> <p>Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.</p>
Program Structures	<p>PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL</p> <p>Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being</p>
Program Structures	<p>PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY FOR TEACHERS AND STAFF</p> <p>Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>
<p>Family Engagement</p> <p>Interagency Collaboration</p>	<p>MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY</p> <p>Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>



<b>Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition</b>	<b>PSEL Standard Alignment</b>
<b>Programming 2.0 Component</b>	
Program Structures	<p><b>OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT</b></p> <p>Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>
Program Structures	<p><b>SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT</b></p> <p>Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.</p>

The five components identified in Kohler’s Taxonomy of Transition Services are Student-Focused Planning, Family Engagement, Student Development, Program Structures, and Interagency Collaboration (Kohler et al., 2016). Each of these elements is heavily influenced by school administrators, their level of understanding, and their ability to support the provision of post-secondary transition services, as evidenced by the required professional standards (PSEL, 2015). School administrators hold a considerable amount of power and influence in determining the structure of a special education program and how it will function. This includes resource allocations, staffing, and support that will be provided to special education teachers (Nanus, 1992). Student-focused planning and student development comprise planning initiatives, Individual Education Plan (IEP) development, assessment, instruction, and available support. Administrators are tasked with developing and supporting intellectually rigorous and coherent curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems to promote each student’s academic success and

well-being, including students with disabilities (PSEL, 2015; Kohler et al., 2016). Family engagement includes involving, empowering, and preparing families. Effective school administrators engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2015; Kohler et al., 2016). Program Structure includes strategic planning, policies and procedures, resource development and allocations, and school climate. Strategic planning, policies and procedures, and resource development and allocations should be outlined and planned collaboratively and regularly. Inclusive and effective administrators manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2015; Kohler et al., 2016). School administrators are directly responsible for facilitating the successful function of the special education program structure (PSEL, 2015). Interagency Collaboration is comprised of a collaborative framework and service delivery. Collaboration and service delivery are also directly housed under a principal's scope of responsibilities. Administrators develop school personnel's professional capacity and practice to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Principals provide professional development opportunities and promote and oversee inclusion services, or services that allow for supporting students with disabilities through individual goals, accommodations, and modifications so that they can access the general education curriculum and be held to the same high expectations as their peers, in their buildings (PSEL, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2020). Through the collaborative efforts of all participants of the IEP team, successful inclusion of students with disabilities is developed. For people with disabilities and their families, transitioning from school to adult life requires a more extensive amount of planning, knowledge, and coordination as compared to those without disabilities (Wehman, 1992). All key components of Kohler's Transition Taxonomy directly influence the

educational experience of students with disabilities and are predictors of successful post-school transition (Kohler et al, 2016). This is all directly influenced by the school administrator's perception and attitude toward providing each service (Nanus, 1992). Literature suggests that being knowledgeable of the indicators of post-school success, practices that support students, family involvement, IEP collaboration, interagency collaboration, and an increase in training in the area of transition services may lead to increased post-school success for students with disabilities (Joswiak, 2021).

### **Problem Statement**

Research illustrates that the post-school outcomes for students with disabilities fall behind those in the general population in post-secondary education, occupational, and independent living skills (Baer et al., 2011). Young adults with disabilities are not only graduating high school, attending post-secondary education programs, and securing gainful employment at less than half the rate of their non-disabled peers but also experiencing lower expectations for their post-school outcomes than any other group (Baer et al., 2011).

Before 1975, schools were not required to support students with disabilities (Joswiak, 2021). Over the past 49 years, public education has conformed to different mandates and reforms that have expanded services and programs in local school districts for children with disabilities (Frost & Kersten, 2011; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 and 2004; the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994; Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994; The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994; The Workforce Investment Act of 1998; The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). The United States has transitioned from having no laws protecting the educational rights of students with disabilities to the requirement of individualized education programs (IEPs), transition services, related services providers, and

many other protections that are meant to improve the post-school outcomes of students who receive special education services (Joswiak, 2021). The effectiveness of mandated transition services for secondary students with disabilities has been, and remains, an ongoing debate among educational leaders and researchers alike. IDEA charged special education teachers and IEP teams with providing evidence-based services to students receiving special education services to help those students have a better quality of life post-high school (US Department of Education, 2004; Joswiak, 2021). Transition services were first mandated in legislation for all secondary students with disabilities in The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004). Amendments to IDEA in 1997 and again in 2004 strengthened the outlined requirements of schools and IEP teams (U.S. Department of Education: Building the Legacy: IDEA, 2004). Although the mandate for evidence-based transition planning was introduced over thirty years ago, literature regarding transition programming in special education has described this planning as inconsistent and inadequate (Petcu et al., 2014). There is a wealth of research on the historical development of transition services and their inclusion in special education law since the onset of special education services through the work of IDEA (2004). Research has explored evidence-based best practices for providing transition services to children with disabilities to help determine the universal predictors of post-school success; however, research regarding the actual implementation of transition services, the quality of those services, or how the perspectives of school administrators affect the implementation of transition services in the classroom is very limited and needs to be explored (Jex, 2023).

Failing to address transition services is one of the most common mistakes school districts make when developing compliant IEPs (Petcu et al., 2014). “Until students with disabilities experience post-school success at a rate similar to that of their peers, the special education field

must continue to improve and adapt” (Joswiak, 2021, p. 7). While helping these students succeed and receive an equitable opportunity should be a top priority for educators, their understanding and perception of personal roles related to carrying out this substantial task creates a barrier to achievement (Christensen et al., 2013). “Unfortunately, disability-related issues remain largely absent within the bulk of leadership preparation programs” (Burton, 2008). The educational administrator, or school principal, is primarily positioned to determine how a special education program will function within the school (Nanus, 1992). Administrators hold one of the most influential positions in supporting and propelling transition programs for students with disabilities to help them attain post-school success, but their lack of training and preparation to execute this obligation poses an issue. Principals report feeling “discouraged” due to their lack of preparation for their roles as leaders of special education programs (Goor et al., 1997). These perceptions of their inability to support special education teachers negatively affect school leaders’ facilitation of successful transition programs (Christensen et al., 2013).

Administrators are very influential and integral to enhancing or hindering the provision of rigorous transition education in their schools. Multiple components of Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 directly relate to administrator duties, but many principals report not being aware of their role in this process nor feeling confident to guide others in the process (Christensen et al., 2013). The problem is to fill this void in educational administration literature and contribute to improving post-secondary transition services. This study will examine secondary administrators’ perceptions of their roles in the transition process and their level of participation in mandatory special education post-secondary transition services.

## **Purpose**

By examining the perspectives of school administrators, this study will provide insights into secondary school administrators' knowledge and perception of their role in the post-school transition process. This qualitative study aims to investigate secondary school administrators' level of participation in their transition programs and understand their perceptions of barriers and facilitators to collaborate with special education teachers to assess and participate in the post-school transition process for students with disabilities. There is a major lack of research regarding administration and special education transition services and a lack of research pertaining to secondary special education specifically (Benitez et al., 2009). While all school administrators began their careers as teachers, all were not special education teachers and did not receive extensive special education training that would provide them with the knowledge necessary to facilitate successful transition programs. My research will examine school administrators' perceptions of their knowledge of and participation in transition programs. Because administrators are mandated members of IEP teams and supervise special education teachers, more research should be conducted to discover how school administrators can affect positive change in transition planning and education programs (Jex, 2023). The information gained from my study will have implications for local school divisions in planning and implementing professional development activities and for universities in planning education programs for future school administrators.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my narrative inquiry process:

1. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as barriers to having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?

2. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?

3. How do Alabama secondary school administrators describe their role in promoting post-school success?

### **Research Design**

I will utilize Kohler's Taxonomy of Transition Planning 2.0 (2016) as a framework to inform the research and interview questions. This outline is widely used as a secondary transition education and services framework. It identifies five critical practices for implementing transition-based education programs for students with disabilities and will help secondary administrators identify the efficacy of their school's transition services. My method of inquiry was further guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) as a methodology to mobilize the experiences and perceptions of secondary school administrators. Schlossberg (1981) defines transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles where perception plays a key role.

Narrative inquiry allows a researcher to understand rather than explain. Through narrative inquiry, the researcher gains access to the personal experiences of the participants and assigns context to the information (Kramp, 2004). Interviews with participants will provide in-depth data regarding school administrators' self-reported knowledge of special education transition protocols, the facilitators and barriers to supporting special education teachers in implementing those protocols, and how they describe their role in the transition process for students receiving special education services. I am using narrative inquiry as my methodological approach and thematic analysis as the analytical tool to identify patterns and themes across the narratives

shared by Alabama secondary school administrators. The narrative inquiry method will encourage the participants to organize their own stories. I will rely on cues from the participants to organize how their story begins and ends. By identifying components from the story through coding, I will analyze emerging patterns and themes in the data using thematic analysis. Using narrative inquiry and thematic analysis together provides a more comprehensive understanding of the data. My focus is on understanding the structure and content of secondary administrators' stories through narrative inquiry and then using thematic analysis to identify common themes across those narratives. I will use a hybrid coding method, utilizing both inductive and deductive coding techniques. I will begin by coding the entire story using the inductive method, then further analyze and interpret the data by applying deductive codes to individual pieces of the story. After coding, I will use a thematic analysis to take all interviews and identify a few core themes and patterns in each. The combination will seek to provide an understanding of participants' overall stories and experiences, turning each individual story into data that can be coded and studied to determine the impact of administrator participation in transition programs on post-school success (Dovetail Editorial, 2023).

The interview is composed of six open-ended questions. The interviews will be offered to a maximum of 10 Alabama secondary school administrators selected from the Alabama Principal Directory using purposive and snowball sampling. Each participant will be asked to volunteer through email.

The recruitment method used to identify individuals as participants in this study included the researcher emailing principals from all 146 school districts in Alabama. Those administrators were asked via email to disseminate the information letter and invitation to participate to all assistant principals or former administrators that they knew had robust knowledge or direct



involvement with special education in their districts. After one month, I sent a follow-up email to all administrators who did not respond.

### **Significance**

The unfortunate reality that students with disabilities consistently experience poor post-school outcomes compared with their peers without disabilities has been well-documented for decades. These statistics suggest professionals must practice strategies to enhance these students' post-school outcomes. One way to counteract these poor outcomes is by providing students with disabilities with rigorous secondary transition services (Test et al., 2015). A study focusing on the understanding and perceptions of secondary school administrators toward transition services is significant in that research has shown that these administrators with knowledge and a positive perception related to inclusion tend to place students in their least restrictive environments more times than administrators who have a less favorable perception of these programs. This ultimately leads to a more inclusive environment for those students (Praisner, 2003). Just as research supports the necessity of inclusion in successfully educating students with disabilities, research also confirms proper collaboration amongst stakeholders equips students with rigorous transition services (Kohler et al., 2016). IDEA defines the required members of IEP teams. These teams should include a “representative of the public agency who is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This clearly describes a school administrator. These administrators are key IEP team members and should be equally as knowledgeable of the required transition services (Jex, 2023).

Many federal laws emphasize the urgency of high academic standards, increased employment outcomes, standards-based accountability systems, and the demand for heightened

collaboration between K-12 schools, post-secondary institutions, families, students, and other stakeholders. Some of this legislation includes the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 and 2004, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Each federal law requires strategies to improve all students' education, including diverse learners receiving special education services (Johnson, 2004). While research examines special and general education teachers' ability to provide inclusive education for these students, insufficient data specifically examines secondary transition services (Benitez et al., 2009). Although schools are tasked with delivering evidence-based practices to promote improved post-school outcomes, a research-to-practice gap exists in special education (Test et al., 2015). There is a massive gap in the research that examines secondary school administrators specifically and the provision of these mandatory special education post-secondary transition services (Test et al., 2015). Research has been done extensively to examine the relationship between school administrators and their knowledge and support of special education inclusion (Ehren, 1981; Yules, 1985; Goor et al., 1997; DiPaola et al., 2004; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Christensen et al., 2013; Sider et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Sun & Xin, 2020; and Palmer et al., 2023) and special education teachers and the provision of transition services (Benitez et al., 2009; Butler, 2001; Bell, 2023; and Burroughs, 2023), but my literature search found that none of these studies were exclusive to secondary schools or exclusive to post-school transition services. My study will be critical to support existing research regarding administrators and special education because it explores administrators, specifically in secondary schools, and their understanding and ability to facilitate and support transition education and services. The literature review that is included in Chapter

Two revealed minimal research regarding secondary school administrators and their direct relation to transition services.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The two theoretical frameworks utilized for this qualitative study are Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning 2.0 and Schlossberg's Transition Theory.

Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning 2.0 is widely used as a secondary transition education and services framework. It identifies five critical practices for implementing transition-based education programs for students with disabilities.

1. Student-focused planning
2. Family Engagement
3. Program Structures
4. Interagency Collaborations
5. Student Development

Research supports that these five fundamental principles positively impact the transition process for students and are predictors of post-school success (Kohler et al., 2016).

Schlossberg defined transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." The fundamental principle that Schlossberg noted is that perception plays a crucial role in transition and dramatically affects how it is experienced (1981).

Both frameworks will inform the qualitative research done in this study. Kohler's five critical practices for implementing transition-based education programs will be used to categorize the transition services provided at each school district. Evidence-based research illustrates that successful school administrators work collaboratively with leadership teams,

families, district administrators, consultants, and other relevant stakeholders. These are key components of Kohler's Taxonomy (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Kohler, 2016). Schlossberg's principle is the foundation governing the narrative inquiry interviews to gain a deeper insight into administrators' perceptions and identify success predictors. Perception affects how transition is experienced, and school administrators are responsible for providing direction for transition programs and exercising influence while leading them (Schlossberg, 1981; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Schlossberg's Transition Theory is based on the idea that transition is complex, and individuals experience transition differently depending on situational factors that are present (Wormuth, 2022). Four key factors comprise Schlossberg's Theory: Situation, Personal Resources, Coping Skills, and Meaning (Schlossberg, 1981; Wormuth, 2022). Situation refers to external circumstances of the change, such as timing, reason, and resources available. Personal Resources refer to internal strengths and abilities such as self-esteem, resilience, and social support. "Coping skills" refer to strategies and behaviors used to manage the transition, and meaning refers to an individual's understanding and interpretation of the transition (Wormuth, 2022). Each factor influences post-secondary transition to post-school outcomes and school administrators' role in student transition.

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions associated with my methodology are that school leaders will provide honest answers to the interviews and have a base level of knowledge to allow them to do so.

### **Delimitations**

This study focuses on the involvement and perceptions of secondary school administrators. The principals and assistant principals that were interviewed are secondary

school administrators in public Alabama high schools. These school administrators were identified using the Alabama Principal Directory and snowball sampling.

### **Defining Transition Services**

Best Practices- refers to several components considered essential in planning and providing support for the transition to adult life (Papay & Bambara, 2014).

Competency- this type of education is characterized by a criterion-referenced approach, emphasizing learners and their exit requirements (Yules, 1985).

Post-school- all life areas likely experienced after secondary school (Joswiak, 2021).

Post-Secondary Education- educational opportunities after completion of secondary school, such as but not limited to attending a community college, trade school, or four-year college or university (Joswiak, 2021).

Principal- a person who is currently employed as the principal of a public school and holds state licensure in administration (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

School administrators- Principals and assistant principals of k-12 schools

Secondary schools- 7- 12 grade schools/students.

Special Education - specially designed instruction to meet the individual needs of a student with a disability. Special education must be provided within public schools at no cost to families (Alabama State Department of Education, 2022).

Transition Programs- “A transition program prepares students to move from secondary setting (e.g., middle school/high school) to adult life, utilizing comprehensive transition planning and education that creates individualized opportunities, services, and supports to help students achieve their post-school goals in education/training, employment, and independent living” (Rowe et al., 2015, pp. 123).

Transition Services- These practices are defined by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs as a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student, is designed to facilitate the student's movement from secondary school to post-school activities, is based on each individual's needs, strengths, and interests, and includes instruction, related services, and practice. These must be implemented by a student's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday (US Department of Education OSEP, [34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)]).

### **Organization of the Study**

The following study is organized into five chapters, and appendixes are used to conclude the study. Chapter One introduces the problem and the nature of the study. This chapter provides background knowledge, limitations, clear definitions of terms, and details regarding the research that will be conducted. Chapter two includes a review of the literature regarding principal preparation programs, special education competencies, administrator roles in transition, school leader perceptions of transition services, and recommendations for improvement from previous literature. Chapter three outlines the research design and methodology used for the study. The survey instrument used to collect data, the selection of study participants, and the study procedures are also described. Chapter four describes the analysis of the data collected and a discussion of the hypothesized results. Lastly, chapter five consists of a summary, conclusion, and recommendations for future research.

### **Summary**

Inequities in positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities are a persistent problem in Alabama and nationwide (Joswiak, 2021). Although transition education and services are federally mandated in secondary schools, disparities continue to expose the flaws in these

programs (Mazzotti et al., 2020). Administrators are very influential and integral in enhancing or damaging the provision of rigorous transition education in their schools (Jex, 2023; Praisner, 2003). Principal preparation programs for school administrators are responsible for educating and preparing principals and assistant principals to effectively promote and support special education programs while doing their due diligence to advance program structures and interagency collaborations regarding transition services (Jex, 2023). A more comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of special education services could contribute to a school administrator's increased confidence in facilitating and soliciting support for special education programs. Understanding perceived barriers and facilitators to lead and encourage successful transition programs for students with disabilities could influence school administrators to make changes. My study investigated research about secondary school administrators' experience in their preparation programs and perceptions of transition programs for students with disabilities. A research study was designed to assess the perceptions of secondary school administrators regarding transition services, their role in the transition planning and process, and how a lack of education and preparation in special education services contributed to those perceptions. Recommendations for future research and improvement are provided.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Review of Literature**

While research supports that higher education and post-secondary training programs can benefit students with disabilities, the problem remains - students with disabilities are not participating in post-secondary education programs, gaining meaningful employment post-high school, or living independently at an equivalent rate as their non-disabled peers (Joswiak, 2021). These students need access to rigorous transition programs to experience success in these areas after high school (Test et al., 2015). Preparing qualified special education teachers is recognized in the literature as one of the critical factors in improving the outcomes of students with disabilities (Benitez et al., 2009). Some of the essential responsibilities of a special education teacher include providing instruction in functional, academic, and vocational education, advocating for students with disabilities, administering instructional and transition assessments, advocating for appropriate accommodations, and facilitating students' achievement of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, all while including transition planning and services. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 charges IEP teams with preparing students to achieve post-secondary outcomes, including furthering their education, career development or employment, and preparing for independent living (Pham, 2013). Because special education teachers are required to have these basic competencies to provide transition services accurately, school administrators should be familiar with the key components that comprise successful transition programs so they can oversee the implementation of these programs. There is limited research regarding why transition services are not appropriately implemented in every special education program. Exploring facilitators and barriers to the implementation of more evidence-based transition services and planning would provide



administrators with knowledge that they could use to counteract the lack of transition services in their schools and provide better support as members of IEP teams (Jex, 2023). The most current version of IDEA (2004) requires educators to implement scientific, research-based interventions to teach transition skills to students with disabilities (Test et al., 2015). In this chapter, I summarized a review of the literature as it relates to contextual barriers to supporting successful post-school transition programs, predictors of post-school success, and recommendations for improving transition services. I investigated research surrounding these topics to identify school leader perceptions that positively influence transition programs and the provision of these services, knowledge gained from principal preparation programs, and suggestions for improving transition programs from a school administrator lens. Researchers have conducted studies like my study related to principal and assistant principal perceptions of educating students with disabilities and leading successful special education programs. For example, Ehren (1981), Yules (1985), DeMatthews et al. (2020), and Palmer et al. (2023) all conducted studies that examined the relationship between school leadership and special education services. Although Ehren began the conversation regarding administrator roles in special education processes in 1981, the problem and lack of involvement persisted (Yules, 1985; Sider et al., 2017; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Jex, 2023; Palmer, 2023). These studies will be integral in helping frame the literature review and providing information on the robust history of administrator roles in special education services.

Ehren (1981) assessed the special education competencies of building-level administrators in public schools and identified the training that contributed to this knowledge. The findings from the study illustrate that all participants regarded the eight identified transition competencies as essential, had some knowledge of transition requirements, and obtained

knowledge from field experience. Ehren (1981) also noted that special education could benefit from further refinement of special education competency levels of school administrators. School administrators did not master competencies regarding special education due process, student records, federal and state mandates, programming policies, and staff functions. Without this basic knowledge, administrators failed to support successful special education programs in their schools (Ehren, 1981).

This study was published after the nationwide implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1985 (PL 94-142). This act changed the way schools operated, as full compliance was required by administrators (Ehren, 1981). This act gave way to many rights for students with disabilities, such as free and appropriate education (FAPE) for students with disabilities, guaranteed due process when making educational decisions, ensuring education took place in students' least restrictive environments (LRE), and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs) for all students receiving special education services (Ehren, 1981; PL 94-142). All administrators must oversee these requirements in their schools, but the results from the study illustrated the administrators' lack of knowledge in supporting and implementing these compliances (Ehren, 1981).

Principal perception continues to be a predictor of involvement in school special education programs today (Kerner et al., 1993; DeMatthews et al., 2020). Yules (1985) identified competencies high school principals need to master to administer special education services effectively using interviews. The findings from the study identified themes with the highest value or priority level. Those themes identified by principals were evaluation for referred students, evaluation of personnel, and implementation of programs according to regulations. The themes

identified by assistant principals were promoting positive attitudes, rules for discipline, and implementing programs according to regulations.

Yules (1985) proposed the idea that administrators began to have an increased responsibility in the decision-making process regarding the education of students with disabilities, but little was written and mandated to describe the role of the administrator in the special education process. This lack of description was attributed to principals' lack of experience participating in special education programs, academic knowledge of special education, and knowledge of students with disabilities' needs (Yules, 1985). Perception played an immeasurable role in the provision of special education services. Differing views on the actual role of the school administrator regarding special education programs are attributed to conflicting views on their responsibilities (Yules, 1985).

DeMatthews et al. (2020) also examined inclusive school administrators' preservice learning experiences. Researchers sought to determine how successful principals described their university-based special education preparation, what leadership practices, skills, or beliefs are essential to leading inclusive schools, and what contributed to that knowledge. This study began with a pilot survey given to forty-three principals in a midsized, predominately Hispanic, urban district in West Texas. The purpose was to understand their perceptions of students with disabilities, their leadership preparation, and their commitments to inclusion. Nine principals were initially identified based on their survey responses for high preparedness in special education and commitment to inclusion. Each principal participated in an initial interview, school walkthrough, classroom observation, and debrief. Additional classroom observations and teacher interviews were conducted to verify the principal's commitment and skill in special education and inclusion. Six principals were ultimately selected, and they all agreed to

participate in this study. The study examined the principals' perceptions of their knowledge of special education services to determine how to prepare other school administrators to implement and supervise special education programs better. Leaders' knowledge and experience from these programs can indirectly influence teachers and students in their future settings (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Palmer et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of a job-embedded principal residency program. This research sought to provide insights into the program's impact on bettering special education programming and examine the special education needs in schools. A qualitative content analysis was used to examine the experiences of six interns in principal preparation programs as they participated in a 15-month, job-embedded principal preparation residency program. The goal was to inform principal preparation programs to increase support of special education programs and implement best practices, and the findings revealed that leadership practices implemented by future principals shift teaching practices, ultimately leading to increased special education student success (Palmer, 2023).

Administrators with special education backgrounds and a basic understanding are more likely to be vested in the improvement of special education programs in their schools, but current research shows that very few administrators possess adequate background knowledge or feel prepared to lead special education programs (Wakemann et al., 2006; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Palmer, 2023). A mere eight out of 87 (9%) leadership programs provide in-depth training in special education policy and procedures (Powell, 2010). A document was produced to address these continued deficits and align the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) with research-based leadership practices that are facilitators of inclusivity in schools (DeMatthews et al., 2020). This document suggests that administrators shift from a compliance

(Ehren, 1981; Yules, 1985) mindset to an outcome and growth mindset (DeMatthews et al., 2020). The shift that began in 1981 with Ehren's study still affects the support administrators provide to special education teachers and students (Palmer, 2023).

Throughout the examination of articles included in the literature review, there is a common theme of school administrators possessing basic knowledge regarding the provision of special education services in secondary settings across different schools and systems; however, the knowledge is heavily related to legal requirements and not comprehensive (Ehren, 1981; Yules, 1985; Palmer, 2023). My study is unique in that it focuses on secondary school administrators and transition services specifically. My proposed study will include the following features: an examination of the barriers to successful post-school transition programs, the predictors of positive post-school outcomes and how administrators support them, recommendations for interventions, and outcomes.

Federal mandates have prompted secondary schools to implement evidence-based practices in providing transition education and services to young adults aged 16 and older receiving special education services in public high schools nationwide (U.S. Department of Education IDEA, 2004). Transition refers to the government-mandated services that secondary special education teachers and IEP teams provide their students (US Department of Education OSEP, [34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)]). These services are defined by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs as a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student, is designed to facilitate the student's movement from secondary school to post-school activities, is based on each individual's needs, strengths, and interests, and includes instruction, related services, and practice (U.S. Department of Education IDEA, 2004).

Post-secondary school activities are individualized for each student based on strengths, interests, and goals established in annual Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (IDEA, 2004).

Because research consistently finds that successful school administrators work collaboratively with leadership teams, families, district administrators, consultants, and other relevant stakeholders, this study will use components from Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming as the model for successful transition service that identifies predictors of post-school success (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Kohler, 2016). Kohler's Taxonomy requires implementing five components- Student Development, Student-Focused Planning, Family Engagement, Program Structures, and Interagency Collaboration. Secondary school administrators are tasked with administering and managing the effective implementation of these critical components (DeMatthews et al., 2020). The perceptions of these secondary school leaders regarding barriers and facilitators to providing transition services to special education students may directly or indirectly affect how they support and assist special educators in providing these services (Jex, 2023; Praisner, 2003).

The following literature review will be organized into four major themes: barriers, facilitators, interventions, and outcomes. There will be an examination of the barriers to successful post-school transition programs, the facilitators or predictors of positive post-school outcomes, recommendations for interventions from previous research, and desired outcomes. Contextual barriers such as lack of knowledge and preparation for administration through principal preparation programs, school resources, and special education teacher knowledge will all be studied. Predictors of post-school success and how school administrators support those practices in their schools will be examined, followed by proposed interventions and desired outcomes. Administrators' perceptions of their role in supporting successful transition programs

will also be studied and used to explain how school leadership can either serve as barriers or facilitators. This literature review details a framework for implementing effective transition programming and how concepts included in the existing framework can be influenced by school administrators.

## **Barriers to Successful Transition**

### **Principal Preparation Programs**

“It is the responsibility of the principal preparation programs to provide the necessary curriculum content and to develop the necessary knowledge and skills of future principals in preparation for their roles as advocates for the free and appropriate education of all students” (Roberts & Guerra, 2017, p.4). Concerns regarding principal preparation programs and the knowledge gap surrounding providing and supporting appropriate special education services are issues that have been ongoing and documented in research since the mid-1900s. The first national organization, The National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), was created in 1947 to address concerns regarding principal preparation programs (Yules, 1985). In Ehren’s 1981 qualitative study, administrators’ perceptions of their special education competencies were assessed. The findings revealed that most participants agreed that previously identified competencies were essential to the function of their job, they had a surface-level knowledge of each competency, they obtained knowledge from on-the-job experience, and they hoped to receive more in-service training but did not have sufficient expertise in special education services to implement their growing responsibilities. (Ehren, 1981). A lack of administrator special education knowledge contributes to poorer transition outcomes and further perpetuates school inequities (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Participants in the study conducted by Sider (2017) stated that the narrow training they received in their principal preparation programs was insufficient in preparing them to lead special education programs (Sider et al., 2017). Leadership preparation in special education administration should follow a conceptual framework that includes teaching future administrators about ethical practices in special education, individual considerations, providing equity under the law, practical programming, and productive partnerships (Crockett, 2002). These components would help high school administrators develop and support the effective implementation of post-school transition programs for students with disabilities (Crockett, 2002).

School administrators report being unable to provide support and offer suggestions for improvement to special education teachers due to a lack of education and training during their principal preparation programs (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Participants also suggested principal preparation programs include more content on special education laws, Section 504, and Response to Intervention. This study highlighted the school leadership programs' lack of coverage of topics that affect diverse learners and promote post-school success for more students (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

### **Lack of Practice and Application**

Many historical researchers felt the quality of field experiences and skill application should be the core of the principal preparatory program (Yules, 1985). A national study of high school principals examined administrators' increasing responsibilities once they entered their roles. Yules (1985) found that principals were becoming more and more responsible for team decision-making regarding students with disabilities. This echoes the importance of school administrators in endorsing student-centered planning and interagency collaboration, two



essential components of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning (Kohler et al., 2016). Historically, principals have relied on specialists in the field of special education (special education coordinators, teachers, and related service providers) to administer the mandated services to students with disabilities (reference). This, coupled with a limited background in special education, has led to school leaders' substandard knowledge regarding the educational needs of these students and has left them unprepared for the task of promoting post-school success for secondary students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Although principal preparation programs are required to provide future school leaders with the competencies required to manage and support successful special education programs - including effective transition services, in their schools, little groundwork has been done to prepare administrators for the actual role of educating students with disabilities (Yules, 1985). The lack of research in this field can be attributed to principals having limited experience working closely with these students (Yules, 1985). Because special education teachers, transition educators, and other specialists are primarily responsible for providing mandated special education services, principal preparation programs are responsible for providing school administrators with the background and experience they need to undertake the obligations surrounding federally and state-mandated special education services (Crockett, 2002).

Principals are meant to be instructional leaders in their school buildings. IDEA guarantees all students with disabilities can access a free and appropriate education in their least restrictive environments. Federal mandates also guarantee that all students receiving special education services participate in transition education and activities. Many principals fail to support this mandated service due to a lack of education and preparation for this considerable task (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Prior research indicates principals lack the preparation to lead

and support inclusive and successful special education programs (Yules, 1985; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Roberts and Guerra (2017) conducted a study surveying principals in school districts across South Texas. 456 administrators received the invitation, and eighty-four responded. The findings from the study indicated elementary, middle, and high school principals were highly satisfied with their knowledge of the IDEA. This supports the claim that many principals perceive that they are well-versed in special education law and feel prepared to and capable of implementing practices based on their knowledge of legal requirements regarding special education services but indicate a gap in knowledge in other areas (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). The findings from this same study revealed that the school administrators' lowest level of knowledge regarding special education was designing a curriculum for students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Due to the lack of education and planning principal preparation programs are providing to aspiring leaders, building administrators are struggling and ill-equipped to design and support successful and rigorous transition programs for secondary students with disabilities, and failing to understand evidence-based practices that are predictors of success (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

When surveyed, school leaders agree that the need for evidence-based practices is important (Jex, 2023). These evidence-based best practices are essential for successfully executing a transition program (Kohler et al., 2016). Administrators understand the importance of using these practices to improve outcomes for students with disabilities but are consistently unable to implement or use these evidence-based practices (Jex, 2023). One reason for the inadequate use of best practices is the absence of preparation (Jex, 2023). School administrators agree that the lack of preparation to deliver transition services directly affects their ability to create an effective transition program in their schools (Jex, 2023). If principal preparation

programs fail to rigorously train and prepare administrators for the measurable task of supporting successful transition planning and education programs, school administrators are unable to support and lead special education teachers in this area. School administrators report not receiving proper training on supporting and promoting successful transition programs, which leads to ineffective programs when they enter secondary schools and must assume this duty (Sider et al., 2017). Jex (2023) aimed to assess if school administrators can be a determining factor for better-structured transition programs that are appropriately implemented in high schools.

To maintain positive climates and inclusive settings, aspiring school administrators must develop a deeper understanding of special education processes and systems through their principal preparation programs (Powell, 2010). Even though evidence-based practice points out the importance of advancing school leader knowledge, research shows that few principals and assistant principals report feeling prepared to be special education leaders in their schools (Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Sider et al., 2017; Jex, 2023). “Only eight out of eighty-seven leadership programs provide training in special education policy and procedures” (Powell, 2010). This is a deplorable statistic, considering that these future leaders will soon be IEP team members tasked with supporting and leading the charge for implementing and improving services for students with disabilities.

### **Special Education Teacher Knowledge**

Not only is the lack of administrator knowledge a barrier to a successful post-school transition, but the lack of knowledge from special education teachers regarding the implementation of successful post-school transition practices also creates obstacles to successful transition. Benitez (2009) examined a national sample of special education teachers’ perceptions

of their transition competencies. Teachers reported a significant lack of preparation to administer special education transition services. This reported lack of knowledge continues to create a barrier to implementing and supporting successful post-secondary transition programs.

Improving the quality of preparation programs could produce more school administrators who are knowledgeable and capable of facilitating and supporting successful transition programs in their secondary schools.

### **Predictors of Successful Post-School Transition**

Over the past three decades, research has shown that post-school outcomes of students with disabilities improve when stakeholders collaborate to implement a broad perspective of transition-focused education programs (Kohler et al., 2016). Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 provides concrete practices for implementing evidence-based transition practices and is widely regarded as a predictor of post-school success (Kohler et al., 2016). The five key components of Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming (2016) are included in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0*

<b>Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
Student Focused Planning	<p>Involves the development of individualized transition plans that consider students' interests, preferences, and strengths.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IEP Development</li> <li>• Planning Strategies</li> <li>• Student Participation</li> </ul>

<b>Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
Student Development	<p data-bbox="621 300 1425 405">Includes providing students with opportunities to develop skills necessary for successful post-school outcomes.</p> <ul data-bbox="670 447 1198 856" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="670 447 873 478">• Assessment</li> <li data-bbox="670 520 930 552">• Academic Skills</li> <li data-bbox="670 594 1149 625">• Life, Social, and Emotional Skills</li> <li data-bbox="670 667 1198 699">• Employment and Occupational Skills</li> <li data-bbox="670 741 938 772">• Student Supports</li> <li data-bbox="670 814 995 846">• Instructional Context</li> </ul>
Family Engagement	<p data-bbox="621 909 1328 1014">Emphasizes the importance of engaging families in the transition planning process to support student goals.</p> <ul data-bbox="670 1056 1011 1234" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="670 1056 979 1087">• Family Involvement</li> <li data-bbox="670 1129 1011 1161">• Family Empowerment</li> <li data-bbox="670 1203 963 1234">• Family Preparation</li> </ul>
Interagency Collaboration	<p data-bbox="621 1287 1409 1392">Encourages collaboration among various agencies and organizations to provide comprehensive support for students.</p> <ul data-bbox="670 1434 1117 1539" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="670 1434 1052 1465">• Collaborative Framework</li> <li data-bbox="670 1507 1117 1539">• Collaborative Service Delivery</li> </ul>
Program Structures	<p data-bbox="621 1591 1425 1696">Involves measuring the effectiveness of transition services and outcomes to inform future planning and improvements.</p> <ul data-bbox="670 1738 1027 1843" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="670 1738 1027 1770">• Program Characteristics</li> <li data-bbox="670 1812 979 1843">• Program Evaluation</li> </ul>

Component	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Planning</li> <li>• Policies and Procedures</li> <li>• Resource Development and Planning</li> <li>• School Climate</li> </ul>

“Competency-based instruction is characterized by a criterion-referenced approach resulting in the emphasis placed upon learners and their exit requirements” (Yules, 1985). The learner is held responsible for meeting the requirements. Graff and Street (1956) sought to define competencies for school administrators specifically. Educational administrative competencies are factors that can be an integral part of effective administrative behavior. These competencies can then be measured using a scale and performance indicators. Understanding what qualifies as a competency and then measuring it on a consistent scale allows more logical coursework during principal preparation programs (Yules, 1985).

Many years ago, the requirements for school administrators only included a basic knowledge of elementary and secondary leadership, the theory of education, the legal duties of administrators, and school finance. The duties have grown as the school principal has been expected to evolve into an instructional leader (Yules 1985). Many school administrators reported that they had adequate training in understanding the special education law but received little or no training for supervising special educators (Gillis, 2006). As inclusive practices and increased inclusion of special education students into general education have become a requirement in public schools, leaders who were not formerly involved in educating students with disabilities are now expected to address the needs of students in special education. Today’s

school leaders are widely responsible for being not only knowledgeable of special education processes but also knowing how to support the implementation of successful programs (Gillis, 2006). While school leaders need special education background knowledge, their ability to advocate for students with disabilities and deliver successful special education services may depend on both knowledge of special education programming and a complex understanding of different leadership approaches to effectively enact changes within their schools (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

A list of success predictors identified by Test et al. (2009) that align with components from Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Planning 2.0 and research-based best practices for transition planning are included in Table 3 as a tool administrators can use to measure student post-school success (Flexer & Baer, 2008; Greene, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Test et al., 2015).

**Table 3**

*Predictors of Post-School Success*

Flexer & Baer, 2008; Greene, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003). These best practices include student involvement in transition planning, family involvement in transition planning, individualized planning for transition, vocational instruction, work experiences, independent living instruction, life skills curriculum, student participation in general education and inclusion, and interagency involvement and collaboration (Papay & Bambara, 2014).

<b>Predictor of Success</b>	<b>Identified by</b>	<b>Outcome Areas</b>
Transition Program	Test et al. (2009)	Education
	Papay & Bambara (2014)	
	Roberts & Guerra (2017)	Employment

<b>Predictor of Success</b>	<b>Identified by</b>	<b>Outcome Areas</b>
Self-Advocacy skills	Test et al. (2009)	Education  Employment  Independent Living
Community Experiences	Test et al. (2009)  Papay & Bambara (2014)	Employment
Interagency Collaboration	Test et al. (2009)  Papay & Bambara (2014)  Roberts & Guerra (2017)	Education   Employment
Occupational Courses	Test et al. (2009)	Education   Employment
Parent Involvement	Test et al. (2009)  Papay & Bambara (2014)  Roberts & Guerra (2017)	Employment

Research suggests that if programming can be provided to support students in the areas of these success predictors, students will experience greater post-school success (Joswiak, 2021).



Torres (1977) identified nine practical functions school leaders should be competent to implement upon completing a principal preparation program. These functions allow principals to provide proper services to support students receiving special education services. The nine functions included:

1. design special education programs and services
2. evaluate special education programs, personnel, and referrals
3. formulate long-term policies and objectives
4. recruit and select staff
5. develop in-service training
6. attend in-service training for professional development activities
7. screen the administration and interpretation of psychological tests and write IEPs
8. provide counseling services for students
9. participate in evaluation and placement committees

All these competencies directly relate to providing special education and transition services. Literature suggests that being knowledgeable of the indicators of post-school success and practices that support students, family involvement, planning and IEP writing, interagency collaboration, and an increase in teacher training, which aligns with the components of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning, 2.0 regarding transition services could lead to improved post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Kohler et al., 2016). These indicators of success include employment, post-secondary education, and independent living. (Joswiak, 2021).

Frost and Kersten (2011) identified foundational knowledge necessary for principals to oversee successful special education programs. This foundational knowledge consists of activities related to ensuring an effective model of service provision to students with disabilities.

Administrators need more comprehensive knowledge and skills of effective collaboration between regular and special education service providers, satisfying inclusion requirements, the impact of school-based decision-making on special education, consistent communication with parents, staffing issues, and professional development to support inclusive schools. (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Collaboration between general and special education aligns with interagency collaboration; satisfying inclusion requirements aligns with student development and student-focused planning; school-based decision-making aligns with program structures; communication with parents aligns with family engagement; staffing issues and professional development to support inclusive schools and the principal as a change agent both align with program structures. Frost and Kersten (2011) also identify and define contextual knowledge as an evidence-based curriculum that aligns with state standards and is appropriate to individual student needs. Some of these areas include IEP and transition plan development, implementing appropriate accommodations, and supervising and evaluating service providers (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Each area aligns with Kohler's Taxonomy of Transition Planning 2.0 and further supports the importance of school leaders' competence in this model to promote successful transition planning in their schools. The alignment of competencies is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Alignment of Competencies and Kohler's Taxonomy*

<b>Roberts &amp; Guerra, 2017</b>	<b>Taxonomy for Transition Programming Component</b>
Collaboration between general education and special education	Interagency collaboration
Satisfying inclusion requirements	Student Development and student-focused

Roberts & Guerra, 2017	Taxonomy for Transition Programming Component
	planning
School-based decision-making	Program Structures
Communication with parents	Family Engagement
Staffing issues and professional development to support inclusive schools and the principal as a change agent	Program Structures

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

“... the first thing a principal should be concerned with is whether a student is learning when a teacher is teaching. To accomplish this goal, a principal must know how to develop or assist with curriculum design for all students, including special education students” (Roberts & Guerra, 2017, p. 13). Being an instructional leader is one of the most critical roles of a school leader. Administrators are not excused from this task as it relates to special education and transition education and planning but are charged to be even more prominent and present in the post-school transition process from the planning stage all the way through the implementation and progress monitoring (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Sider et al. (2017) stated that school leadership should be transformative and systematically promote academic achievement, family and community empowerment, democratic engagement, and global citizenship. This definition includes ideas associated with themes in Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Planning, 2.0. Frost

& Kersten (2011) examined previous research to identify many different responsibilities that principals who oversee effective special education programs practice. Some of those critical roles are accessing resources to assist in decision-making, supporting and monitoring procedures, ensuring parental involvement by building and sustaining a positive rapport, collaborating and building trust with stakeholders, attending and participating in initial and difficult IEPs, establishing and modeling a shared philosophy of service delivery to students with disabilities, and implementing a personal, professional development plan that includes topics related to students with disabilities. School administrators should use evidence-based practices and predictors to help guide staff development and school policy related to special education and transition services (Test et al., 2015). Administrator leadership is extremely significant and directly impacts teachers' practices and student learning (Test et al., 2015). School leaders not only model ethical and legal expectations in schools but are also responsible for implementing IDEA and highlighting the need for superior knowledge in effective supervision of special education programs, including transition (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). The essential function of the school principal has changed from being the primary school disciplinarian and supervisor of the physical building to an instructional leader tasked with complying with laws and not only prioritizing the diverse educational needs of students in the school but also designing programs that allow access and promote success for all students (Test et al., 2015). These essential duties directly align with the components of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming and could positively impact schools' special education services.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) established that the fundamental role of the principal includes maintaining a positive school culture and promoting success to guarantee that the rights of students with disabilities are protected, in addition to their role as

instructional leaders (Test et al., 2015). Professional organizations, including the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), highlight the importance of the principal's role in quality special education programming (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Leaders who are well-informed about special education and other topics surrounding educational administration are better positioned to foster equity for students with disabilities, encourage collaborative partnerships among professionals and parents, support effective teaching practices, and organize schools to enhance teachers' work and student's learning (Crockett et al., 2012). The duties reinforce interagency collaboration, family engagement, student-focused planning, student development, and program structures, which are the key components of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming. DeMatthews et al. (2020) recommend that school administrators cultivate a comprehensive knowledge of the impact of disabilities on student learning as well as the requirements of IDEA. Principal and assistant principal roles should shift from compliance to an outcome and growth mindset while developing skills to lead and monitor instructional progress for all students, including those with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Effectively preparing personnel requires focusing on specific transition competencies and knowledge that is often beyond what is currently included in most special education teacher preparation programs (Anderson et al., 2003; Morningstar & Clark, 2003). Several studies reveal special education teachers' reported lack of knowledge of evidence-based transition competencies (Benitez et al., 2009). The teachers responsible for delivering instruction promoting successful post-high school transition identified this lack of knowledge as a factor that hindered their ability to implement effective practices. Not only are these teachers unable to implement effective practices, but their lack of preparedness to deliver evidence-based transition

services may be contributing to poor outcomes for students with disabilities (Benitez et al., 2009). Support from knowledgeable administrators could help reverse these poor outcomes. Several principals recognized they had an advocacy role and a commitment to collaborate with other stakeholders (such as special education teachers and parents) to enact student-centered planning to increase post-school success (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Almost half of special education teachers report feeling ill-prepared to provide appropriate post-secondary transition services to their students receiving special education services (Benitez et al., 2009). School leaders must have the training to support and lead special education teachers through this process (DeMatthews et al., 2020). “School principals play a substantial and valuable role in delivering special education services at the building level. They must lead, administer, supervise, and manage the provision of special education programs and services at the building level while ensuring that students receive a free and appropriate education in their least restrictive environment” (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Due to the lack of preparation for roles in the administration of special education programs in schools, principals may be unaware of the extent of their responsibilities. They may also delegate their duties to other personnel in the building with more special education expertise (Goor et al., 1997). This creates a barrier to them furthering their understanding of transition programming and being able to advance it.

Jex (2023) conducted a quantitative study examining school administrators' perspectives regarding the provision of transition planning and education and what barriers exist that prevent the successful delivery of these services. The authors distributed a survey to forty-nine Minnesota school administrators and special education directors. The questionnaire examined administrators' efforts to train staff to provide transition services. When asked in Jex's survey to

prioritize duties, school administrators placed high importance on carrying out transition services and planning for students with disabilities (Jex, 2023). While they agreed on the importance of using evidence-based practices for providing transition services, they recognized there are significant barriers to the actual execution of these principles (Jex, 2023). Because school administrators- assistant principals, principals, superintendents, and special education directors- are representatives of the public agency who are knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and the availability of resources of the school, they are essential members of the IEP team, which is responsible for ensuring transition planning and education is provided and carried out. School administrators are essential in preparing and training staff to provide transition services to students with disabilities (Jex, 2023). If school administrators could identify and remove the barriers preventing them from having well-trained staff, there could be an improvement in the development and implementation of transition planning and services. This could lead to staff having a greater knowledge of and using evidence-based practice for transition.

Benitez et al. (2009) stated that because the roles of secondary special educators are changing rapidly, teacher education programs would respond accordingly. Unfortunately, this has not yet proven to be the case. Findings from a national survey of over 500 special education teacher prep programs exposed the lack of transition standards taught in education. This data illustrates special education teachers' lack of aptitude and ability to provide students with evidence-based transition services. Research has indicated that almost half of secondary special educators feel poorly prepared to address most of the transition needs of their students (Benitez et al., 2009). If special educators report receiving so little instruction to support their required duties, school administrators must have a comprehensive knowledge of these services to set

standards for and support their school's transition program. Although the legislation has changed over the last few decades, the litigation in transition services continues to reflect flaws in implementing IDEA's requirements (cite legal cases). To ensure compliance with these federal requirements by developing lawful and accurate transition plans that will lead to improved post-school outcomes, school administrators must ensure that IEP team members know their responsibilities under the IDEA (Petcu et al., 2014).

Schein (1992) identified some other critical roles for school administrators, and two of those were continuously developing leadership skills in teachers and actively engaging community stakeholders. A positive school climate and culture develop and progress when these factors are present. Both key duties directly align with improved transition programs. If school principals are actively engaging stakeholders, they are advancing interagency collaboration and family involvement and developing leadership in teachers that will empower them to strategically plan and deliver student-focused, evidence-based transition services to students. Administrators who understand special education processes possess the knowledge and skills to support teachers better and provide them with appropriate support (DiPaolo, 2004).

There are many research-based best practices for providing transition services, and researchers have identified predictors of success. The following section will examine the desired outcomes of successful transition programs.

### **Desired Outcomes of Transition Programs**

The following section will explore the desired outcomes of transition programs by looking through the lens of post-school success predictors. Data published by The National Secondary Transition Technical and Assistance Center and Papay & Bambara sought to determine common factors that suggest a successful transition to post-secondary education,



employment, and independent living (Test et al., 2015; Papay & Bambara, 2014). Predictors of post-school success refer to the essential practices implemented to support the transition to post-school life (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Each predictor presented aligns with a component of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming, 2.0.

Disability employment statistics published in 2015 indicated that only 18% of individuals with disabilities participated in the labor force compared to 68% of individuals without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a). Providing students with disabilities with effective secondary transition services is critical to combat these poor outcomes (Test et al., 2009). Test et al. (2015) wrote an article to provide administrators with an overview of effective post-secondary transition practices and post-school success predictors. In research conducted by The National Secondary Transition Technical and Assistance Center (NSTTAC), 17 evidence-based practices and predictors of success for secondary students with disabilities were identified. All the identified practices included strategies for teaching students with disabilities transition skills, including employment, social, and independent living skills (aligning with sections in Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming) (Test et al., 2015). NSTTAC's experimental research in secondary transition did not investigate the effects of interventions on post-school outcomes for students with disabilities but synthesized high-quality correlational research in secondary transition published from 1985 to 2015 to make recommendations for improving transition programming (Test et al., 2009). As a result of Test's experimental research, 17 predictors of post-school success were identified and summarized in table 5, post-school predictors and areas they affect. The 17 items' alignment to their post-school outcome and Kohler's Taxonomy is identified (see Table 5).

## **Table 5**

*Post-School Predictors and Areas They Affect*

<b>Predictor/Outcome</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Independent Living</b>	<b>Kohler's Taxonomy Alignment</b>
Career awareness	X	X		Student development
Community experiences		X		Student development
High school diploma status		X		Program structures
Inclusion in general education	X	X	X	Student-focused planning  Interagency collaboration
Independent Living	X	X	X	Student development
Interagency collaboration	X	X		Interagency Collaboration
Occupational courses	X	X		Student development  Student-focused planning
Paid employment/work experience	X	X	X	Student development  Student-focused

<b>Predictor/Outcome</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Independent Living</b>	<b>Kohler's Taxonomy Alignment</b>
				planning
Guardian expectations	X	X		Family engagement
Parental involvement		X		Family engagement
Self-determination	X	X		Student development  Student-focused planning
Social skills	X	X		Student development
Student support	X	X	X	Student development  Program structures
Transition program	X	X		Student-focused planning  Program structures
Vocational education	X	X		Student development  Student-focused planning
Work Study		X		Interagency collaboration

Predictor/Outcome	Education	Employment	Independent Living	Kohler's Taxonomy Alignment
				Student development
Program of study		X		Program structures  Student-focused  planning

The resources gave administrators an unbiased method to assess and oversee their school's implementation of evidence-based practices and to make recommendations for improving their transition programs (Test et al., 2015).

The NSTTAC also synthesized research conducted over many years to identify which components of high school transition programs promote better post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009). This synthesis allowed school leaders to make recommendations for improving school transition services. The predictors can be used to guide and improve existing school policy to ensure students with disabilities are provided with transition services that encourage post-school success (Test et al., 2015). Similarly, Papay and Bambara (2014) sought to determine which transition practices may predict post-school success. After adding mandated services to IDEIA, many suspected "best practices" have circulated literature despite the lack of empirical evidence (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Best practices refer to components deemed essential in planning support for the transition to post-school life. These activities represent alterable interventions and strategies that schools can implement to increase the chances of success of post-school success,

which will supersede unalterable variables, such as the characteristics of these students and/or their families. Seven agreed-upon best practices can be identified when investigating five of the most recent comprehensive lists of best practices in transition for youth with disabilities (Flexer & Baer, 2008; Greene, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003). These best practices include student involvement in transition planning, family involvement in transition planning, individualized planning for transition, vocational instruction, work experiences, independent living instruction, life skills curriculum, student participation in general education and inclusion, and interagency involvement and collaboration (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Multiple of the identified best practices also show up amongst Kohler's five components of Taxonomy for Transition Planning, 2.0. Students involved in their transition planning process were three times more likely to have taken a postsecondary education class up to two years out of high school than youth who were not involved (Papay & Bambara, 2014). These students were also five times more likely to be employed between 2 and 4 years out of high school (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Students who experienced family involvement were 41 times more likely to have attended postsecondary education between two and four years out of high school than students whose families were not involved. The association between parent expectations and successful post-school outcomes has been documented in previous studies and was consistent in this study (Test et al., 2009; Papay & Bambara, 2014). The findings are consistent with previous research, suggesting that implementing Kohler's taxonomy for Transition can greatly improve transition services provided to students with disabilities.

Hill et al. (2018) wrote a policy brief to educate school leaders on their responsibilities under recent case law to prepare students with disabilities for work and careers. Policies regarding the transition from secondary school to post-school life for young adults with

disabilities have changed significantly in recent years through developments in the enforcement of integral laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), *Olmstead v. L.C.*, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Hill et al., 2018). Although there have been significant advancements in the civil rights of students with disabilities over nearly 4 decades, the disparity in post-school outcomes remains (Hill et al., 2018). The brief listed common factors practiced by secondary schools that contribute to lessened chances of securing competitive and integrated employment for students with disabilities. Some of these factors include a lack of preparation for competitive employment after exiting high school, being modeled to mimic sheltered workshops, failing to provide students with disabilities with marketable skills, segregating, stigmatizing, and setting low expectations, and not being individualized and implemented proactively in a student's academic career. Administrators can intervene and support more successful programs by knowing the factors that negatively contribute to post-school transition and requiring special educators in their districts to implement necessary changes. High school principals should require special education teachers and transition specialists to model special education employment courses after the school's career technical, cooperative education, or workforce classes (Hill et al., 2018). This change would strengthen student development, student-focused planning, and interagency collaboration, all evidence-based practices cited in Kohler's Taxonomy of Transition Planning that are predictors of successful transition outcomes (Kohler et al., 2016). General education students are immersed in conversations, research, and education regarding their futures as soon as they enter high school and many times before. Through these employment opportunities, they interact with community stakeholders and gain marketable skills from participating in integrated experiences (Carter et al., 2012). Carter, Austin, and Trainor (2012) examined the post-school employment

outcomes of students with disabilities and factors that serve as barriers or facilitators to those outcomes. They used the National Longitudinal Transition Study–2 (NLTS-2) to address the research questions, “What are the post-high school work experiences of young adults with severe disabilities?” and “To what extent are student demographics, student skills (e.g., social, communication, and self-care), family factors (e.g., family resources and parent expectations), and high school career development programming associated with employment after high school?” The NLTS-2 was designed to provide nationally representative information about students receiving special education services transitioning from secondary school to adulthood. Data were gathered over a 10-year period (2000–2010) from parents, youth, teachers, and schools in a series of five waves (every 2 years). Their research supported that participation in paid work experiences during high school is a crucial predictor of obtaining competitive integrated post-secondary employment, and participation in pre-vocational training is not (Carter et al., 2012). Competitive integrated employment can be broken down into two parts. Competitive means that an employee with a disability earns similar wages and benefits as employees without disabilities who do the same job. Integrated means the individual with a disability is working with co-workers and customers with and without disabilities (IDR, 2023). This evidence further illustrates the necessary shift that needs to take place in high schools for students with disabilities to be included in cooperative education, career technical education, and workforce opportunities that are available to students in general education and end the historical sheltered workshop models (Carter et al., 2012). Sheltered workshops typically hire only people with disabilities to conduct a single assembly task while hiring non-disabled employees to supervise and assist workers with disabilities. Workers with disabilities often complete the same task over and over. They are frequently paid less than minimum wage and sometimes earn only a

few pennies per hour. Sheltered workers are not paid during “down time,” or the time they spend in the sheltered workshop when no piece of work is available. Unlike their supervisors without disabilities, sheltered workshops rarely provide workers with disabilities benefits like health insurance, retirement plans, worker’s compensation, and paid time off. It is very difficult to learn new skills or get promoted as a sheltered worker (IDR, 2023). A few transition models that rely on integrated work experiences and person-centered assessments have been implemented and correlated to improved post-secondary employment outcomes (Taylor et al., 2023). These models include Seamless Transition, The Guideposts for Success, Youth Transition Program, and Project SEARCH (Carter et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2023). Involvement in special education improvement efforts, understanding student needs, supporting stakeholder partnerships, and dismantling segregated programs are practices adopted by successful inclusive school leaders with adequate preparation and training (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Administrators could adopt these evidence-based models and practices and accommodate them to fit their school settings to help improve transition outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Bays and Crockett found that no systematic monitoring of instruction, evidence- or research-based instruction, or accountability to student progress was evident in teaching students with disabilities in nine different elementary schools across the southeast (2007). In Frost and Kersten’s study, 132 elementary (including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) school principals in one county in Illinois received an electronic, forty-one-item questionnaire. Of the 132 contacted principals, 56 responded and provided usable survey results. Based on the reported data, the elementary school principals rated their areas of special education services knowledge within the average to good range. Principals rated themselves lowest in developing a program improvement plan for special education, knowledge of state learning standards for students with



disabilities, and knowledge of special education rules and regulations contained in their state code. School administrators lack education and experience managing special education programming in their schools (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Although the proposed study focuses on leadership and special education at the secondary level, the results from Bays and Crockett's study support the claim that school leaders need a more comprehensive understanding of special education to support improved outcomes for students with disabilities. Student-focused planning, student development, and family engagement should start as early as elementary school. The lack of rigorous services provided to students with disabilities exacerbates the gap in achievement outcomes between these students and their typical peers (Bays & Crockett, 2007). Introducing Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning into special education programs, even at the primary and elementary level, gives school leaders an evidence-based and structured measuring tool to support special education programming. Collaboration between special education teachers and IEP teams at feeder schools, schools where most students transition to a particular higher-grade level school, should be taking place to further support these efforts (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

Etscheidt et al. (2023) sought to provide a critical examination of performance monitoring mechanisms used to measure transition program success and to propose recommendations for improvement, hoping that the propositions will ensure the transition planning process is student-centered, transition outcomes are enhanced, and school practices follow the IDEA transition requirements. Data from transition indicators should be disaggregated by ethnicity and race to identify possible disparities in post-school outcomes for students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds (Etscheidt et al., 2023).

Although federal mandates created a centralized definition to focus on improving the post-secondary transition outcomes of students with disabilities and research provided useful models to address transition, the problem persists. Students with disabilities are experiencing poorer success rates than their peers. Sprunger et al. (2017) accredited the lower success rates to a lack of curriculum that translates evidence-based predictors into generalized, real-life activities and secondary special education teachers' ability to implement that curriculum with fidelity. Administrators should examine instructional practices and service delivery provided by IEP teams to help improve transition outcomes for secondary students with disabilities in their schools (Sprunger et al., 2017). Many school districts are not consistently providing professional development regarding transition planning and transition programming for special education professionals and staff (Jex, 2023). Without these opportunities to continue to learn and grow in their ability to provide adequate transition services to students with disabilities, teachers will continue to fall short in the provision of transition planning and education. In 2013, a study of special education teachers was conducted to gain more detailed information regarding where special education teachers and staff gain their knowledge about transition programs and evidence-based practices for delivering transition services. The study concluded that overall, teachers reported that they did not gain their knowledge through professional development but from trial and error, research journals, and previous experiences. This information introduces a potential first step in improving transition programming for students with disabilities (Jex, 2023). This allows for much misinformation and implementation of strategies for providing transition services that are not evidence-based. School leaders at local or state levels can consistently provide professional development to ensure transition service providers can deliver services with the highest quality based on the most current evidence-based practices. Transition programs

could be improved through ongoing professional development and the introduction of job coaches that aid in transition assessment and planning with fidelity (Jex, 2023). Regularly teaching and maintaining these expectations and requirements can greatly enhance a school's transition program.

Another strategy for improving transition outcomes for students with disabilities supported by Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning 2.0 is more intentional collaboration between schools and outside service providers. Parents surveyed reported rates as low as 54% that their children received mandatory transition services (Jex, 2023). Federal law mandates the development of a transition plan and the delivery of transition services for all students with a disability by age 16, even earlier, in many states (IDEA, 2004). This statistic is an unfortunate call to the reality that more collaboration needs to be implemented to ensure parents receive the education regarding transition services that they need to ensure their students receive their mandated services. Greater collaboration with outside services such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), gaining a better understanding of transition policies, and developing professional development related to transition services are all tasks school administrators could take responsibility for to better support and promote successful transition programs in high schools across the country (Kohler et al., 2016).

Administrators are instructional leaders, creating their school's overall climate (DeMatthews et al. 2020). According to Schlossberg's theory, perception greatly influences transition (Schlossberg, 1981). The following section will examine school administrator perspectives regarding special education services and how they affect their school's transition programs.

### **School Administrator Perspectives**

School leaders are expected to lead high-quality special education programs that continue to diversify schools and be more inclusive (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Kerner et al. (1993) found the key predictor of a post-secondary transition program's success is the principal's attitude toward it. This also relates to school leaders' attitudes toward transition programs and supports the importance of examining principals' perspectives when analyzing barriers or facilitators to a transition program's success. School administrators continue to express concern that they do not understand how disabilities impact student learning and behavior (Wakeman et al., 2006). This perceived lack of education and confusion is not conducive to an appropriate IEP team that will soon be responsible for teaching skills and practices to support post-school success.

Yules (1985) sought to understand what competencies principals valued and perceived as the most important in successfully carrying out their assigned duties. Principals chose the statements of the most significant priority, and those results were "evaluation for referred students" and "evaluate personnel." School administrators found "implementing programs according to regulations" to be a priority for the leadership role.

DeMatthews's qualitative study identified six principals who lead successful inclusive schools in a mid-sized West Texas school district (2020). These school leaders provided insight into their principal preparation programs and their perceptions of the information they received during those programs. Each principal reported a common theme in their preparation programs, including inclusion and equity issues. Both themes were discussed generally, but no specifics on supporting students with or without learning disabilities were given (DeMatthews et al., 2020). One principal reported feeling like administrators do not learn enough in pre-service programs to accurately support diverse students, saying, "If we knew more, maybe we could do a better job serving them in the general education classroom..." (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Many principals

disclosed that they had to learn tough lessons when they entered their schools due to a lack of information and experience in special education, which could have been avoided had they been provided more training related to disabilities and special education processes. (DeMatthews et al., 2020). A quantitative study was conducted to gauge school administrator perspectives regarding knowledge, skills, dispositions, and the provision of special education services in schools (DeMatthews et al., 2020). An analysis of the results illustrated that principals lacked the knowledge and experience to lead successful special education programs. In support of the results, principals overwhelmingly cited their principal preparation programs for failing to provide them with the knowledge required to actively support and advance their school's special education programming (Sun & Xin, 2020). The principals' reflections further supported the claim that having a more comprehensive understanding of special education is paramount to the effective implementation of post-school transition programs that lead to increased success.

Sider et al. (2017) employed a qualitative study that examines school leaders' perceptions and experiences when promoting inclusive programs in their schools. The study explored the perspectives of twenty school administrators and five additional stakeholders representing four different school boards in Southern Ontario. According to Zaretsky et al. (2008), "A goal of inclusive education is to increase meaningful participation and achievement of all students who [are] increasingly vulnerable to the effects of marginalization in existing educational arrangements." Secondary students with disabilities are extremely susceptible to lowered post-school success rates. School administrators who genuinely support and foster inclusion in their schools provide opportunities for these students to experience increased success regarding transition outcomes (Sider et al., 2017).

In Frost & Kersten's quantitative study, elementary school principals' perceptions of their knowledge of special education and involvement with special education teachers were examined (2011). The research question it sought to answer was, "To what extent do elementary school principals understand and incorporate knowledge of special education into their instructional leadership role?" The findings from this survey indicate that all principals' indicator ratings were at least in the average range, illustrating that each school leader perceived their competency levels to be at least base level. Two of the lowest ratings included monitoring the alignment of IEPs to state learning standards and planning program improvement for special education programs and services. The study provided information that could be used by administrator preparation programs and school districts to inform necessary changes and improve transition programming (Frost & Kersten, 2011). The lack of administrator knowledge regarding aligning individualized plans to standards and planning program improvement for students with disabilities mirrors the issues plaguing secondary school principals. Ensuring that transition services provided to high school students preparing to exit align with state transition standards is a need not being met in many schools (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Making plans for improvement regarding transition services for students with disabilities is also a necessity that allows schools to stay up to date with current legal requirements and meet the standards set by institutions of continuing education (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

The qualitative study conducted by Sprunger et al. (2017) investigated the perceptions of secondary special education administrators regarding the 16 evidence-based transition predictors. Administrators also provided insight into those predictors' impact on the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities. Study participants indicated that active parent involvement and

mastery of independent living skills were highly effective in encouraging post-school success (Sprunger et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The literature review provided information from research regarding contextual barriers to supporting successful post-school transition programs, predictors of post-school success, and recommendations for improving transition services. Research shows that higher education and post-secondary training programs can benefit students with disabilities, but students with disabilities are not participating in post-secondary education programs or gaining meaningful employment post-high school at an equivalent rate as their non-disabled peers (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Sprunger et al., 2017; Almakay, 2020; Joswiak, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). These students need access to rigorous transition programs to experience increased chances of success in these areas after high school, and school administrators are tasked with supporting the delivery of these services (Kohler et al., 2016). This literature review investigated research surrounding school administrators and transition services to identify barriers and facilitators to supporting successful post-school transition programs and recommendations for improving transition services.

Research supported the theory that school administrators' special education knowledge is heavily related to legal requirements and is not comprehensive (Ehren, 1981; Yules, 1985; Palmer, 2023). Equipping school leaders with more knowledge to support special education transition services will help eliminate barriers that prohibit students with disabilities from entering post-secondary education programs and gaining meaningful employment (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Sider et al., 2017; Sprunger et al., 2017; Jex, 2023).

Because research consistently supported that successful school principals work collaboratively with leadership teams, families, district administrators, consultants, and other relevant stakeholders, this study utilized Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 as the model for predicting successful transition service (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Secondary school principals and assistant principals are tasked with implementing the five components- Student Development, Student-Focused Planning, Family Engagement, Program Structures, and Interagency Collaboration- and effectively implementing these critical components. The perceptions (how school administrators perceive their knowledge of transition services) of these secondary school administrators toward providing transition services to students receiving special education services may directly or indirectly affect how they support and assist special educators in providing these services.

This chapter presented information regarding contextual barriers to supporting successful post-school transition programs, predictors of post-school success, and recommendations for improving transition services. I also investigated research surrounding these topics to identify school leader perceptions that can serve as barriers or facilitators. Each topic was examined to analyze further the facilitators and barriers to school administrators supporting effective special education transition programs. The next chapter focuses on the methodology of this study. The methodological approach and analytical tools will be described in detail.



## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

As discussed in the literature review, a limited amount of research focuses on secondary school administration and the secondary school administrators' perceptions of secondary special education transition services. Several research studies have focused on principal and assistant principal perceptions of educating students with disabilities and leading successful special education programs. For example, Yules (1985), Ehren (1981), Palmer et al. (2023), and DeMatthews et al. (2020) all conducted studies that examined the relationship between school leadership and special education services. Although many have conducted similar studies, this study is unique in that the current study focuses on high school administrators and transition. The contextual barriers to supporting successful post-school transition programs, predictors of post-school success, and recommendations for improving transition services will be explored. This qualitative study investigates what secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of supporting post-school success, barriers to supporting post-school success, and their perceptions of their overall role in the post-school transition process for students with disabilities. This research provides recommendations for improving administrator involvement in their school's transition program. This understanding provides insights to school administrators in Alabama to support ongoing professional development for administrators, increased collaboration between administrators and special education teachers, increased administrator knowledge and skills of the transition process, and improved quality of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Chapter three includes a description of the research design, the instrument used, the participants, the sample size, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis procedures. In the following sections of this chapter, the research questions are listed, a description of the study

participants is outlined, and the narrative inquiry interviews and thematic data analysis are explained in detail. Data collection methods, ethical considerations, and the study's limitations conclude this chapter.

## **Research Design**

Narrative inquiry allows a researcher to understand rather than explain. Through narrative inquiry, the researcher gains access to the personal experiences of the participants and assigns context to the information (Kramp, 2004). Narrative inquiry interviews provided in-depth data regarding school administrators' perception of facilitators and barriers to and how they interpret their role in supporting the post-school transition process for students receiving special education services. This approach was particularly suited to this study because it focuses on administrator stories about their lived experiences. Given that my study aims to understand how secondary administrators perceive their roles, their challenges, and the factors contributing to successful post-school transition for students with disabilities, narrative inquiry provides a framework for capturing the depth and complexity of these personal and professional experiences.

In this study, I utilized Kohler's Taxonomy of Transition Planning 2.0 (2016) as a framework to inform the research and interview questions. This outline is widely used as a secondary transition education and services framework. It identifies five critical practices for implementing transition-based education programs for students with disabilities and will help secondary administrators identify the efficacy of their school's transition services. Wehman (1992) defines transition as making adjustments and life-changing experiences that take place as individuals move from school to independent living or postsecondary education. Lack of preparation can prevent individuals from being successful when they are met with opportunities for transition. My method of inquiry was further guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory

(1981) as a methodology to mobilize the experiences and perceptions of secondary school administrators. Schlossberg (1981) defines transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Cimera (2003) states, “Simply put, transition is the point in which somebody faces life-altering change” (p. 3). The key factor that Schlossberg addresses is that perception plays a key role in transitions.

The data gained from the interviews was complemented by the data analysis procedure, thematic analysis, which was used to identify recurring patterns and themes across the administrators' narratives. By examining these themes, I was able to analyze how the administrators' lived experiences and perceptions align with the principles included in Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (2016) and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981). The combination of narrative inquiry and thematic analysis allows for both the robust, detailed stories of individual administrators to emerge and for broader, actionable insights into the barriers and facilitators of transition services to be identified. This method is especially beneficial for this study, as I am trying to understand the participants' perspectives and lived experiences surrounding transition services. This data helps answer the research questions.

### **Research Questions**

The research study followed a qualitative research framework, using one-on-one interviews with secondary-level school principals and assistant principals to explore their perceptions and lived experiences. The following questions guided my narrative inquiry process:

1. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as barriers to having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?

2. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?

3. How do Alabama secondary school administrators describe their role in promoting post-school success?

The research questions emerged from a review of the literature and the identified gaps within the existing scholarly research literature. The use of narrative inquiry in this study is aligned with the research questions, which focus on understanding school administrators' perceptions and experiences regarding their roles in special education transition services. Each research question is designed to explore complex, real-life challenges and practices, which are best examined through the personal stories and reflections of the administrators themselves.

Research Question 1 seeks to uncover the barriers administrators face in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities. Narrative inquiry enables participants to reflect on challenges they have encountered over time, recounting specific incidents or patterns they have experienced. This method captures both individual and contextual factors that may hinder successful transitions, providing a deep understanding of systemic and personal barriers.

Research Question 2 explores the strategies or practices that administrators identify as facilitating successful transitions. Through narrative inquiry, administrators can recount specific instances of success and describe how particular practices or initiatives have contributed to positive outcomes. This approach allows for a rich exploration of not only what works but also the contextual factors that make those strategies effective, helping to generate insights into best practices.

Research Question 3 focuses on how school administrators perceive their involvement in transition services. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to addressing this question because it allows administrators to share their lived experiences, providing detailed insight into their personal perceptions, values, and beliefs about their roles. Through their stories, I can explore what they do and how they interpret and feel about their involvement in transition services.

By analyzing these perceptions and experiences through thematic analysis, I can identify common themes and patterns across the administrators' stories. This allows me to address the research questions individually and broadly, highlighting shared experiences and challenges.

### **Setting and Context**

This study took place via phone calls and Zoom interviews, allowing administrators to participate in interviews at convenient times and locations. This flexibility ensured administrators' participation across various geographic areas and helped them feel comfortable and willing to talk freely about their lived experiences. The virtual format facilitated open conversations and provided a flexible space for the participants to share their detailed stories. This is relevant to my study because I am seeking to uncover the robust stories that clearly explain administrator perceptions, pulling from real examples they have experienced.

The participating administrators work in various school districts across Alabama, ranging from semi-urban to rural settings (city and county school districts), providing varied resources and challenges in serving students with disabilities. These differences in the schools' socioeconomic makeups (multiple Title 1 schools) and availability of resources deeply inform the administrators' perceptions and experiences regarding special education transition services and provide important background for understanding the administrators' stories as they influence the day-to-day realities of providing transition services.

Additionally, efforts were made to build rapport and ensure confidentiality in the virtual space, allowing participants to share their insights candidly. Conducting the interviews in settings where participants felt comfortable, such as their offices or homes, likely contributed to the depth and richness of the data collected. This setup was essential for uncovering robust stories that clearly explain administrator perceptions drawn from their reflections and direct experiences in the field.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected carefully using purposive sampling and solicited by emails obtained from the Alabama Principal Directory. Additional participants were identified by snowball sampling; secondary principals from all 146 Alabama school districts were contacted via email and asked to disseminate the participation information to other administrators (current or former) in the state who fit the criteria. This method was appropriate because principals have in-depth knowledge of other assistant principals and former administrators in their districts committed to inclusion and knowledgeable about special education services.

To recruit participants, I sent an informational letter via e-mail to Alabama secondary public-school administrators. The letter explained the interviews regarding their school's special education programs and solicited their participation in initial phone screeners, and possible interviews. I explained that data gained from this survey could improve their school's transition programs. The letter explained the interview objectives and the use of pseudonyms and general identifiers and contained information regarding consent. After one month, I sent one follow-up email to administrators who did not respond to increase participation. Each administrator who agreed to participate first took part in an initial screening phone call, and if they met the selection criteria, they received a request via email to participate in interviews over Zoom. School

administrators were selected based on consistent knowledge of special education transition services and their school's transition program success. A description of the selection criteria is included below:

During the initial identification phone call, administrators had to be able to:

- Identify the 3 diploma pathways available for students with disabilities.
- Identify the transition services offered by their school (if their school has a 12<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond program, Essentials Work Credit course, etc.).
- Identify any state-funded services that come in to collaborate with students exiting special education programs in their schools (Vocational Rehabilitation)
- Identify the requirement of IEPs to include transition services for high school students.
- Confirm that they currently work in or have worked in a secondary public school that provided services to students receiving special education services.

All seven administrators who participated in the phone screener met the selection criteria.

After the first email, I received responses from five administrators agreeing to participate in the initial phone screener. The original window to participate in the initial phone screener was July 10<sup>th</sup>, but I extended the window to solicit more participation and accommodate my second request. I followed up with a second email to all administrators that I did not receive a response from after one month. This email solicitation resulted in five more administrators scheduling initial phone screeners, bringing the total to ten. Three administrators scheduled phone screeners and did not attend nor respond to follow-up requests. Seven administrators participated in the initial phone screener, and all seven met the selection criteria. Six of the seven administrators responded to follow-up emails requesting an interview via Zoom. Six administrators participated in interviews and will be referred to throughout the study as City School Administrator 1, City

School Administrator 2, City School Administrator 3, City School Administrator 4, County School Administrator 5, and County School Administrator 6. This number of administrators was appropriate for my qualitative study because it aligns with the typical sample size used in qualitative research, particularly in narrative inquiry. Narrative studies focus on obtaining rich, detailed accounts from participants rather than aiming for a large, representative sample. The six administrators who participated in the narrative interviews provided in-depth stories regarding their experiences that allowed for a thorough exploration of the research questions related to their perceptions and experiences in supporting special education transition services.

All six participants began their teaching careers with general education certifications, then moved into administration, and had varying years of teaching and administrative experience (m= 20 years; range= 10-30 years of experience). City School Administrator 1, City School Administrator 2, County School Administrator 5, and County School Administrator 6 were former assistant principals who currently serve as principals at high schools, and City School Administrator 3 and City School Administrator 4 were current assistant principals in a high school and a junior high school. All served as assistant principals in high schools during the course of their careers and were responsible for serving as Local Education Agency representatives (LEAs), attending IEP meetings, and supporting special education teachers. Five of the six participants worked in Title 1 schools. Some other pertinent demographics of the participants' school systems are the academic achievement rates of the overall school population vs. students with disabilities specifically and the college and career readiness rate. The academic achievement rate is an accountability system indicator determined based on the number of students scoring within each of the achievement levels in the areas of English Language Arts (ELA) and math utilizing summative and alternate assessments in tested grades. The college and



career readiness rate is an accountability system indicator determined based on the percentage of students enrolled in the 4-year Cohort who met at least one of the College and Career Readiness indicators (State Report Card - Alabama Department of Education, 2024). City School Administrators 1, 2, and 3's district had an academic achievement rate of 63.13%, 27.63% for students with disabilities, 87.46% college and career readiness rate, and 55.56% for students with disabilities. City School Administrator 4's district had an academic achievement rate of 96.43%, 57.11% for students with disabilities, 92.06% college and career readiness rate, and 58.33% for students with disabilities. County School Administrator 5's district had an academic achievement rate of 61.78%, 30.14% for students with disabilities, 89.34% college and career readiness rate, and 68.18% for students with disabilities. County School Administrator 6's district had an academic achievement rate of 35.54%, 19.20% for students with disabilities, 58.42% college and career readiness rate, and no reported data for students with disabilities (State Report Card - Alabama Department of Education, 2024). These statistics further highlight the achievement gap between students in general education and special education and the likelihood of post-school success for students with disabilities. City School Administrators 1, 2, and 3's district serves a student body that is 29.3% White, 53.7% Black, 13.7% Hispanic/Latino, and less than 1% each of other ethnicities. City School Administrator 4's district serves a student body that is 81.6% White, 5.2% Black, 6.9% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.7% Hispanic/Latino, and less than 1% of other races. County School Administrator 5's district serves a student body that is 62.4% White, 31.5% Black, 3.2% Hispanic/Latino, and less than 1% other ethnicities. County School Administrator 6's district serves a student body that is 2.1% White, 95.3% Black, 5% Hispanic/Latino, and less than 1% other ethnicities (*Find the best K-12 schools - U.S. news*

education, n.d.). Graphic representations of the participant demographic information are in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Type of School	Title 1 School	5	83.3%
	Non-Title 1 School	1	16.7%
Administrator Role	Principal	4	66.7%
	Assistant Principal	2	33.3%
Academic Achievement Rate for Students with Disabilities	Above 50%	1	16.7%
	Below 50%	5	83.3%
College and Career Readiness for All Students	Above 50%	5	16.7%
	Below 50%	1	83.3%
Student Demographics	Majority White	2	33.3%
	Majority Black	4	66.7%

Given the purpose of my study, which was to explore school administrators' perceived roles, challenges, and successes in promoting post-school transition, this number was sufficient. During the interviews, concepts and patterns became redundant, no new codes were needed to

describe the data, and all aspects of the research questions were addressed, suggesting data saturation had been achieved. Saturation occurs when no new themes or insights emerge from additional data, meaning that the collected narratives provided ample insight into the patterns and themes being explored. These six administrators offered diverse perspectives that further enriched the findings.

Furthermore, a smaller, focused sample size allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews, ensuring that each participant's narrative was analyzed in detail through thematic analysis. This depth of analysis is crucial in qualitative research, where the goal is to explore and understand the complex nature of individual experiences rather than generalize to a larger population.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection consisted of narrative inquiry interviews. Interviews took place over the summer and fall semesters of 2024. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions focused on the administrator's experience and level of involvement in special education transition services and questions to gain information on their position, background, and experience with special education. Interviews were approximately one hour long. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's AI Companion, and coded identifiers were used (ex: City School Administrator 1). Zoom's AI Companion reports a Word Error Rate (WER) of 7.40% and a 99.05% accuracy rating in LLM Assistant, which evaluates transcriptions based on context, grammar, phrasing, and overall meaning, resulting in Zoom's AI Companion leading in accuracy, outperforming other popular platforms like Webex and Microsoft Teams (Zoom AI Performance Report 2024, n.d.). After each interview concluded, information from each administrator was transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. The interviews were examined

in full context and then reviewed multiple times to determine if there were familiar data, issues needing reevaluation, or a discrepancy needing clarification.

**Instrumentation**

The interview questions are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Transition Services Interview*

<b>Question Number</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
Pre-Question	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).
Q1	Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that special education teachers in your school were well-trained and knowledgeable about providing evidence-based transition services.  a. include how you handled those challenges.
Q2	Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school.  b. include how you created opportunities for that teacher to influence others).
Q3	Please describe any specific actions or initiatives you have taken or implemented that illustrates your role in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities.

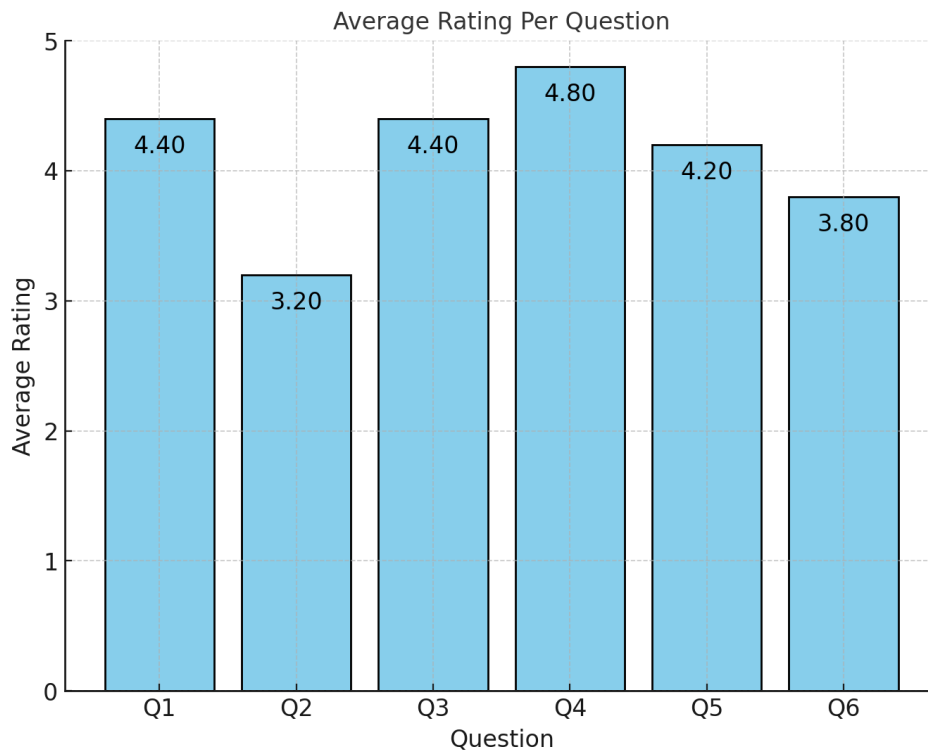
Question Number	Interview Questions
Q4	Reflecting on your experiences, can you highlight the most significant challenges you've encountered in ensuring that special education teachers are adequately trained and knowledgeable in providing evidence-based transition services?
Q5	Reflecting on examples of special education teachers successfully providing evidence-based transition services in your school, please share how you see the key factors of their program being replicated in the future.
Q6	Reflecting on a specific initiative or program you've implemented or participated in to promote post-school success for students with disabilities, what lessons have you learned from those experiences?

Before distribution, the interview questions were shown to a focus group of five special education teachers and inclusive post-secondary education program staff members. Items were analyzed to determine if each contained relevant information concerning the administration of transition programming in public schools. After reading each question, respondents indicated their perception of the item's importance. Respondents were given the option to respond on a five-point scale. This scale included the following items: 1) Not at all important, 2) Minor or very minor importance, 3) Moderate importance, 4) Great Importance, and 5) Very tremendous or Highest importance. The agreement percentage among all special education professionals questioned regarding the relevancy of the interview questions is approximately 73.3%. This

means that 73.3% of the ratings were 4s or 5s, indicating a high level of agreement on the relevancy of the questions. The results of the focus group are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Focus Group Average Rating*



### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. I applied a hybrid model of reflexive thematic analysis (inductive) and codebook thematic analysis (deductive) to incorporate pre-set codes while developing new codes and themes as the interviews progressed and repetitive patterns emerged. Thematic analysis is characterized by its exploratory nature. Thematic analysis is the classification of patterns and themes to uncover underlying meanings within a data set. It is not necessary to identify every possible theme that might arise in the data but to focus on the key

patterns, themes, and consistent aspects uncovered in data that relate to the research questions (Crosley, n.d.).

After data collection, I synthesized the qualitative data to provide a holistic understanding of the research questions. This was achieved by:

- Using qualitative data to provide context and depth.
- Drawing connections between administrators' self-reported knowledge, involvement, and strategy descriptions.
- Analyzing patterns or themes in the data to answer the research questions

Using this method allowed me to identify common patterns and themes in each administrator's story. I began by coding the entire story using the inductive method, then further analyzed and interpreted the data by applying deductive codes to individual pieces of the reported experiences. After each interview concluded, audio was transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. The recorded interviews were reviewed multiple times to ensure transcription accuracy and determine if any responses required further clarification. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and saved in AU Box File Storage. Coded identifiers were applied to protect the participants' identities. The transcriptions were downloaded into Atlas.ti and coded using thematic analysis before developing into emergent themes. Following iterative cycles of data coding, the identified codes were subjected to cross-analysis alongside the guiding research questions. This process facilitated the extraction of the most emergent themes within the data.

The information gained from the study provides an understanding of how school administrators already do and can better support improved transition programs.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In my initial information letter, I included informed consent, explaining the purpose of my study, what participation involves, a statement explaining voluntary participation, confidentiality, risks and benefits, contact information, and a link to submit their names and information online if they consented to participate. Participants were informed that their identities would be protected by using general identifiers (e.g., a county district high school principal), and any potentially identifying details (such as specific school names) would be removed from the transcripts. All interview recordings, transcripts, and related data will be stored in Auburn's "Box" file storage, which is secure, and password protected. Only I (the researcher) will have access to these files. The data will be stored five years after the study is completed, after which it will be permanently deleted. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and in these cases, all data associated with their participation would be destroyed. I informed all participants before the initial phone screener that my research had been submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### **Researcher Positionality**

My role in this narrative inquiry is to listen to the stories about the lived experiences of secondary school administrators in public schools in Alabama as they relate to supporting special education teachers and promoting successful transition services.

As an educator with extensive special education experience, I bring both professional knowledge and personal passion to this research. My work in the field has shaped my belief in the importance of effective transition services for students with disabilities, and I recognize that this belief could influence how I approach and interpret the narratives of school administrators, most of whom do not have a special education background. While my background as a high school special education teacher and a coordinator in a post-secondary transition program for



students with disabilities provides valuable insight into the day-to-day realities faced by special educators, it also requires me to be mindful of potential biases. I share a professional connection with many of the participants, as we all work within the educational system, but I am also aware that my role as a researcher might affect the power dynamics in the interviews. I have sought to address this by fostering an open, conversational atmosphere during data collection, emphasizing the importance of their unique perspectives, and regularly affirming and commending their leadership. Throughout the thematic analysis process, I have taken steps to mitigate any biases by remaining reflexive and revisiting the data to ensure that my interpretations accurately reflect the administrators' experiences. By being transparent about my positionality, I aim to enhance the credibility of this study and ensure that the findings truly represent the voices and stories of the secondary administrators.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

One significant limitation was the lack of diversity among the participating administrators, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Three of the six participants were from the same school district, indicating that the experiences and perceptions captured may not reflect the broader context of secondary education across Alabama. The limited representation from socioeconomically and geographically diverse districts restricts the applicability of the results to other administrative settings and may overlook the unique challenges faced by administrators in different regions or school types.

This study is delimited by several boundaries that were intentionally set to focus the scope of the research on specific participant selection, a smaller sample size, specific methodology, virtual data collection procedures, a focus on perceptions, limited theoretical frameworks, and a specific time frame. First, the participants selected for this research are

secondary school administrators in Alabama. This decision narrows the scope to those who work or have worked in leadership positions in secondary public-school settings, excluding perspectives from elementary administrators, special education administrators, and teachers or other staff involved in special education services specifically. The study involves six administrators, which allows for in-depth, qualitative data collection but may not capture the full range of experiences across all secondary administrators in Alabama. Additionally, the research uses narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, which focus on gathering and interpreting administrators' lived experiences and perceptions rather than evaluating the effectiveness of the transition services they are providing. Data was collected through phone calls and Zoom interviews, providing flexibility for participants though limiting the ability to observe the contextual environment of the school. Finally, the study is bound by its theoretical frameworks, using Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (2016) and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), which provide a specific lens through which the research questions are explored. The data collected reflects administrator perceptions during the study's time frame, recognizing that any changes in policy or practice after this period are not captured in my findings.

## **Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design and methodological framework guiding this qualitative study, focusing on the perceptions of secondary school administrators regarding special education transition services. Chapter three detailed the selection criteria for participants, which included six secondary administrators from various districts in Alabama, allowing for diverse insights into their lived experiences. I used narrative inquiry to facilitate in-depth interviews, capturing administrators' robust, personal experiences and providing an understanding of their roles in transition planning. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify key

themes and patterns emerging from the data, ensuring that the voices of the participants were central to the findings. By utilizing these qualitative methods, I addressed the research questions effectively, illuminating the complexities of administrator perceptions and the barriers and facilitators they encounter in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities. This methodological approach aligns seamlessly with the purpose of the study, providing more insight into school leaders' multifaceted experiences in special education transition services.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

This research investigated the perceptions of secondary school administrators regarding their involvement in transition service delivery and implementation. Using narrative inquiry, this study captured administrators' rich, personal stories, revealing the complex ways in which they perceive their roles and challenges in supporting special education teachers. The open-ended nature of narrative inquiry allows for a deep exploration of how administrators' lived experiences shape their engagement with transition services, going beyond surface-level responses. Thematic analysis, applied to the interview data, enabled the identification of patterns and key themes in their narratives, shedding light on both barriers and facilitators in providing evidence-based transition services. This chapter begins by presenting the research questions and providing an overview of the emergent themes. Detailed findings corresponding to each research question follow, supported by direct quotes from participants that illustrate the complexity of their roles. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings and their implications for practice.

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as barriers to having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?
2. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?
3. How do Alabama secondary school administrators describe their role in promoting post-school success?

## Findings

### Research Question One

1. *What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as barriers to having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?*

In response to the first research question, the administrators consistently highlighted several barriers, including a lack of resources, inadequate training programs, staff turnover, changing policies, and a lack of administrator knowledge. One administrator reflected on this challenge, stating, "I had the law classes, but I had so many questions. You can't learn everything about it [special education] in a class." This quote encapsulates a broader issue. Administrators may receive foundational training through leadership preparation programs, but the complexity of special education law and practice requires ongoing professional development.

The lack of resources was a particularly prominent barrier. Administrators described how insufficient funding and limited access to professional development opportunities prevented special education teachers from staying up to date on best practices. One rural county school administrator talked about the creative efforts they took to ensure their special education teachers were well-trained, even with the constraints surrounding funding in their district. This not only affects teachers but also limits the quality of transition services available to students with disabilities. The challenge of high staff turnover further compounds these issues, with administrators noting that they struggle to retain experienced special education teachers who are critical to providing consistent and effective transition services.

### Research Question Two

*2. What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?*

Administrators identified peer mentoring, coaching cycles, and expert collaboration as key facilitators in supporting special education teachers. One city school district administrator described the peer mentoring system in their district, saying, "Peer mentoring and coaching cycles provide opportunities for the teachers who need it to grow." This structured support system allowed less experienced teachers to learn directly from seasoned educators, improving their ability to deliver high-quality transition services.

Another facilitator that emerged was the importance of collaboration with experts. Several administrators discussed how they relied on district-level special education coordinators to provide guidance and ensure that their teachers followed evidence-based practices. One participant explained, "I don't have all the answers, so I always reach out to our district's special education expert for advice." This reliance on external expertise highlights the value of interagency collaboration in improving the overall quality of transition services, an approach aligned with Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning 2.0 (2016).

### **Research Question Three**

*3. How do Alabama secondary school administrators describe their role in promoting post-school success?*

Administrators described their roles as multifaceted, involving strategic planning, support for special education teachers, and creating school-wide programs to promote transition skills. One city school district assistant principal shared, "When I moved to the high school, they mentioned three diploma pathways and requirements, and I started asking questions and not getting

answers. I wanted to be the best LEA possible." This comment reflects how some administrators take proactive steps to ensure that transition goals are embedded within their school's broader educational mission but highlights the knowledge gap that exists.

In terms of specific initiatives, administrators mentioned creating programs like "W.I.N. Time (What I Need)," which provided personalized support to students based on their individual needs. One administrator explained, "We've created programs that involve the entire school, so transition planning starts early, has teacher buy-in, and is reinforced in every class and extracurricular activity." These initiatives were designed to foster a school-wide culture of transition readiness, where every student, regardless of ability, had access to transition services from early in their high school career. Administrators also highlighted the importance of ongoing support and follow-up, many stating their plans to ensure that special education teachers and district professionals had opportunities to continue to collaborate throughout the school year. See Table 8 for more details corresponding with each research and interview question.

**Table 8**

*Research and Interview Question Details*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Question</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting Quote</b>
<b>1.Barriers to Well-Trained Teachers</b>	1. Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that special education teachers were adequately	Lack of Resources, Inadequate Training Programs, Staff Turnover, Changing Policies, Lack of Administrator	"I had the law classes, but I had so many questions. You can't learn everything about it [special education] in a class."

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Question</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting Quote</b>
	trained.	Knowledge	
	4. Reflecting on your experiences, can you highlight the most significant challenges encountered in ensuring teachers are adequately trained?	Lack of Knowledge, Changing Policies, Teacher Attrition	"I realized I don't know the answers and have to reach out to the [special education professionals]."
<b>2.Facilitators of Well-Training Teachers</b>	2. Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school.	Peer Mentoring, Coaching Cycles, Teacher Collaboration	"Peer mentoring and coaching cycles provide opportunities for the teachers who need it to grow."
	5. Reflecting on successful implementation, how can these practices be	Collaboration Models, Mentorship Programs,	"Our success was due to a mentor program where experienced teachers



Research Question	Interview Question	Themes	Supporting Quote
	replicated in the future?	Administrative Support	supported new hires."
<b>3.Administrators' Roles in Promoting Post-School Success</b>	3. Describe any actions or initiatives that illustrate your role in promoting post-school success.	Strategic Planning, Involvement in Transition Planning, Creating School-Wide Programs	"When I moved to the high school, they mentioned three diploma pathways and requirements, and I started asking questions and not getting answers. I wanted to be the best LEA possible."
	6. Reflecting on specific initiatives, what lessons have you learned from those experiences?	Importance of Ongoing Support, Flexibility in Implementation	"There's a lot of trust and responsibility placed on administrators [by special education teachers]."

In using Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Planning, 2.0 (2016) and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) as the guiding theoretical perspectives for this study, I was able to gain insight as to how administrator's strategies and perceptions of their involvement contributed to

practices that promote successful post-secondary transition. Administrators' narratives illustrated a few emergent themes that were consistent and recurring in each interview.

## **Facilitators**

### **Collaboration**

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the narrative accounts was “The Importance of Collaboration.” Administrators frequently highlighted the critical role that collaboration between other special education teachers, special education experts, and administration played in promoting successful transition outcomes for students with disabilities. For example, City School Administrator 1 shared, “I realized I don't know the answers and have to reach out [to the special education professionals].” This theme encapsulates the collective effort required to provide holistic transition services, reflecting the necessity of interagency collaboration, an important aspect included in Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Planning, 2.0 (2016). Administrators from all 4 districts emphasized the importance of special education teachers having the opportunity to collaborate with other experts in special education and other experienced stakeholders, being a major facilitator to their success in implementing evidence-based transition services, and their inability to work with other special education experts as a barrier to the implementation of these services. City School Administrators 1, 2, 3, 4, and County School Administrators 5 and 6 all mentioned providing opportunities for special education teacher collaboration by having veteran teachers and district leaders observe novice teachers and collaborative planning blocks or meetings. Each administrator detailed their efforts to refer struggling or new special education teachers to a veteran special education teacher, department head, or district coordinator when problems and challenges arise regarding special education in their building.

### **Peer Mentoring**

Another facilitator identified in promoting post-school success was the use of peer mentoring. Administrators emphasized how peer mentors provided essential support to other special education teachers, serving as role models and helping to bridge program implementation gaps. City School Administrator 4 noted, “Coaching cycles have helped our teachers in need.” County School Administrator 6 echoed this same theory, illustrated in their practice of pairing a veteran or high-performing special education teacher with a newer or struggling special education teacher. This collaboration between peer mentors and other special education teachers creates a robust support network, allowing for more 1:1 support in the classroom setting to help ensure special education teachers implement programs that promote post-secondary success. City School Administrators 2, 4, and County School Administrator 6 highlighted that by having a fellow special education teacher observe classroom practices and provide immediate feedback to special education teachers who are struggling with providing evidence-based services and meeting their deadlines, they can provide better support and oversight of the special education and transition programs.

## **Barriers**

### **Administrator Lack of Knowledge**

Another significant theme that emerged was “The lack of knowledge an assistant principal possesses to adequately support special education teachers when they first enter the field.” Each administrator shared anecdotes reliving their first time serving as an LEA at an IEP meeting or assisting in an issue where a student needed to be restrained, and more, and recalled how unprepared they were, even though they were expected to be the expert and provide support to the special education teachers at that moment (City School Administrators 1, 2, 3, and 4, and County School Administrators 5 and 6). This further supported the idea explored in previous

research (Ehren, 1981; Yules, 1985; Goor et al., 1997; DiPaola et al., 2004; Burton, 2008; Benitez et al., 2009; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Christensen et al., 2013; Sider et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Sun & Xin, 2020; and Palmer et al., 2023) that leadership preparation programs alone do not thoroughly prepare administrators to assist in leading successful special education or transition programs. Several administrators described the challenges of having limited knowledge of the special education specifics as a key barrier to promoting and supporting transition programs. City School Administrator 4 explained, “There's a lot of trust and responsibility placed on administrators [by special education teachers],” and City School Administrator 1, “I had the law classes, but I had so many questions. You can't learn everything about it [special education] in a class.” This theme underscores how school leaders adapt to the constraints of their level of knowledge while striving to maintain high-quality transition services and provide ongoing support. Despite these obstacles, City School Administrators 1, 2, 3, and 4 and County School Administrators 5 and 6 expressed a commitment to finding innovative solutions and creating opportunities to learn from experts, further reflecting that resilience and dedication to special education student success (their perception) positively impact their special education programs (Schlossberg, 1981).

### **Strategies to Promote Post-School Success**

#### **Ongoing Support and Program Implementation**

Administrators described providing ongoing support and implementing school-wide programs as essential strategies to promote post-school success. This included multiple initiatives that exposed students to diverse transition options. Each new program was tailored to address students' individual needs and promote positive post-school options and strategies. County School Administrator 5 shared, “We've created programs that involve the entire school,

so transition planning starts early, has teacher buy-in, and is reinforced in every class and extracurricular activity.” By embedding transition goals within the broader school culture, these programs ensure that every student has continuous access to support regardless of their background. Each administrator also stressed the importance of follow-up services and long-term planning to sustain students’ progress, demonstrating a commitment to short-term outcomes and long-term student independence and achievement that followed students as they moved past high school. Some of these policies that promoted ongoing administrator support included providing common planning time among special education teachers, quarterly district department meetings, and professional development specifically tailored for special education teachers.

### **Summary of Findings**

Although each administrator had differing years of experience and educational backgrounds, the emerging themes were similar and recurring in everyone’s answers. Themes such as collaboration, peer mentoring, lack of administrator knowledge, and new program implementation were developed throughout each narrative interview and were the most prominent. The narrative interviews revealed several additional key themes related to barriers, facilitators, and the perceived role of administrators in promoting successful post-school transitions for students with disabilities. Administrators identified barriers such as inadequate leadership training programs and limited administrative knowledge as challenges to ensuring special education teachers are well-prepared to provide evidence-based transition services. Conversely, peer mentoring, expert collaboration, and coaching cycles were highlighted as critical facilitators in supporting special education teacher development and promoting successful program implementation. Additionally, administrators perceived their role in promoting post-school success as multifaceted, involving strategic planning between them and

special education experts, providing ongoing support for special education teachers, and developing school-wide initiatives that align transition services with the broader school culture and goals. Regardless of the district, each administrator highlighted common themes and key issues. No new themes developed or emerged during the fifth and sixth interviews, and saturation was achieved. Details on the reoccurrence of themes are shown in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Saturation Details*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Interview Quotes</b>	<b>Participant</b>
Q1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I had the law classes, but I had so many questions. You can't learn everything about it [special education] in a class.”</li> <li>• “Leadership classes did not prepare me for difficult IEP meetings.”</li> <li>• “I didn't major in special education...”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City School</li> <li>Administrators 1 and 4,</li> <li>County School</li> <li>Administrator 5</li> </ul>

Q2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Peer mentoring and coaching cycles provide opportunities for the teachers who need it to grow."</li> <li>• "Our department head really does a great job leading and supporting the other special education teachers."</li> <li>• "We have a teacher who has only been teaching for 3 years, but he was able to provide PD support for other special education teachers to help them with IEP's and timelines."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City School Administrators 1 and 4, County School Administrators 5 and 6</li> </ul>
Q3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "...I wanted to be the best LEA possible."</li> <li>• "I began ..." [specific school-wide programs]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City School Administrator 1, 2, 3, and 4, and County School Administrator 5</li> </ul>
Q4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I realized I don't know the answers and have to reach out [to the special education professionals]."</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge of special education specifics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City School Administrators 1, 2, 3, 4, and County School Administrators 5 and 6</li> </ul>

Q5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Our success was due to a mentor program where experienced teachers supported new hires."</li> <li>• Establishing processes and procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• County School Administrator 6, City School Administrators 1, 2, 3, and 4</li> </ul>
Q6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "There's a lot of trust and responsibility placed on administrators [by special education teachers]."</li> <li>• "Collaboration..."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City School Administrators 1, 2, and 4, and County School Administrators 5 and 6</li> </ul>

Overall, the findings derived from thematic analysis from the narrative inquiry interviews underscore the need for comprehensive administrative training during and after leadership programs and robust collaborative support networks to promote positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.



## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

In response to the consistent challenges faced by students with disabilities related to post-school transition services, this research study examined the perceptions of administrators regarding the facilitators and barriers to successful post-secondary transition and their perceived role in promoting and supporting these services. Through narrative inquiry interviews, administrators shared their perceptions and lived experiences regarding special education transition services. The primary focus of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of how administrators perceive their role in the transition process and to investigate how they are collaboratively involved in supporting and promoting post-school success for secondary students with disabilities. The administrators from different school districts across Alabama were purposely selected using criterion and snowball sampling. By focusing on the selected group of school leaders, the study aimed to gain insight into their lived experiences as leaders of special education programs and how they perceived their knowledge, challenges, and facilitators in supporting special education teachers and transition programs. The narrative inquiry approach was chosen to capture comprehensive and insightful viewpoints on high school special education and transition services (Clandinin, D. J., & Caine, V., 2013). This method was effective in gathering input from a purposely selected group of secondary school administrators in Alabama. The administrators who volunteered to participate answered questions through semi-structured interviews. The interviews consisted of a series of six open-ended questions that focused on the administrator's perspective. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, and transcribed into AU Box. General identifiers were applied to protect the participants' identities. The transcriptions were downloaded into Atlas.ti and coded using thematic analysis before developing into emergent themes. Following iterative cycles of data coding, the identified codes were subjected

to cross-analysis alongside the guiding research questions. This process facilitated the extraction of the most emergent themes within the data. This chapter delves into an interpretation of the identified themes, drawing connections between the findings and the established conceptual frameworks, which then critically compares the results with the extant literature. Finally, the chapter identifies the broader implications of this research and proposes recommendations for future studies.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Many of the emergent themes discovered through administrator interviews very closely aligned with integral components of the conceptual frameworks that guided this study, Kohler's Taxonomy, 2.0 (2016) and Schlossberg's Theory (1981). This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings from the thematic analysis conducted from the narrative inquiry interviews and connects these findings to the theoretical frameworks. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming, 2.0 (2016) served as a structural foundation to evaluate administrators' roles and practices in supporting successful special education transition services, emphasizing emerging domains such as student-focused planning, program structures, and interagency collaboration. In parallel, Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), which explores how individuals experience change, offers a lens to better understand how administrators perceive and navigate the challenges of promoting post-school transition services. Together, these frameworks help contextualize the themes that resulted from the narrative interviews within a structured approach to transition programming and a deeper understanding of administrators' adaptive strategies in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration emerged as a prominent theme in every administrator interview. Various forms of collaboration were highlighted, including collaboration with peer mentors (other special education teachers), special education experts, general education teachers, and special educators and administrators. This overarching theme aligns directly with two components of Kohler's Taxonomy—Interagency Collaboration and Program Structures (Kohler et al., 2016). Interagency Collaboration focuses on collaborative service delivery, where students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders work together to provide evidence-based services. Program Structures pertain to policies, procedures, and school climate, which encompasses individualized student learning and a supportive school environment (Kohler et al., 2016).

The emphasis on fostering a positive school climate is also reflected in Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which highlights that one's perception of an event or non-event significantly influences their transition experience (Schlossberg, 1981). Administrators prioritizing creating a positive school climate and strengthening interagency collaboration contribute to environments that support student needs and teacher effectiveness in providing transition services. This alignment between theory and practice underscores the importance of collaborative school culture in enhancing the delivery of transition services for students with disabilities, as well as in promoting successful post-school outcomes (Kerner et al., 1993; Praisner, 2003; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Jex, 2023).

The prominence of collaboration also directly addresses Research Question Two: *What do Alabama secondary school administrators perceive as facilitators of having well-trained and knowledgeable special education teachers who provide evidence-based transition services?* Administrators consistently emphasized that collaboration, whether through peer mentoring, expert guidance, or partnerships with external stakeholders, was critical in ensuring that special

education teachers were well-prepared to support students effectively. This finding suggests that fostering a collaborative culture is not just beneficial but essential for supporting well-trained special educators and promoting successful post-school outcomes.

The research reviewed in Chapter Two similarly found that successful school administrators work collaboratively with leadership teams, families, district administrators, consultants, and other relevant stakeholders. Thus, the emergence of this theme from the thematic analysis aligns closely with existing literature on successful transitions (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Kohler et al., 2016).

### **Peer Mentoring**

The importance of peer mentoring is another theme that emerged as a facilitator in each administrator interview. Multiple administrators recalled specific examples of peer mentoring, such as coaching cycles with mentor teachers, regular meetings with department heads, and being assigned as mentees to veteran special education teachers, enhancing successful transition services. Peer mentoring guided best practices and supported in navigating challenges and ongoing collaboration, contributing to more effective transition planning.

This emergent theme aligns with three components of Kohler's Taxonomy—Student-Focused Planning, Interagency Collaboration, and Program Structures (Kohler et al., 2016). Administrators who prioritize fostering an environment for special education teachers to learn and practice new instructional strategies experience more knowledgeable teachers, which leads to positive post-school outcomes for students.

Moreover, the theme of peer mentoring extends some key success predictors discussed in Chapter Two, particularly the significance of peer mentoring and the administrator's role in supporting this practice. These results corroborate existing research while offering new insights

into the specific strategies Alabama secondary school administrators use. For example, Test et al. (2015) highlighted that administrator leadership and support directly impact teacher practices and student learning. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) emphasizes the principal's role in maintaining a positive school culture and promoting success. Administrators contribute to this culture by supporting peer mentoring and promoting student success through teacher development.

Additionally, allowing veteran teachers to mentor novice or struggling special education teachers reflects administrators' commitment to collaboration with stakeholders, such as experienced special education teachers, to improve services and increase post-school success (Goor et al., 1997; DeMatthews et al., 2020). Given the reported lack of knowledge of evidence-based transition competencies among special education teachers (Benitez et al., 2009), supporting peer mentorship becomes crucial to the administrator's role in promoting effective transition services. Each administrator acknowledged the importance of relying on special education experts to design, implement, and support these services.

### **Administrator Lack of Knowledge**

The findings related to administrators' lack of knowledge regarding transition services unsurprisingly echo the challenges highlighted in the literature review in Chapter Two. Previous research emphasizes that many school leaders are inadequately trained in the specific requirements of special education transition planning, which directly impacts their ability to support effective post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Ehren, 1981; Wakemann et al., 2006; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Palmer, 2023). This study reinforces these concerns, as several administrators expressed uncertainty about independently supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices and transition services, underscoring the ongoing gap in professional

development and leadership preparation training identified in the existing literature. For instance, approximately 9% of leadership programs provide in-depth training in special education policy and procedures (Powell, 2010), leaving many school leaders ill-prepared for the complexities of transition planning. This statistic was further supported by administrator interviews in this study, where multiple secondary school leaders pointed out gaps between the theoretical knowledge they acquired, such as special education law, and the practical skills needed to effectively support special education services once in their roles. These gaps included knowledge on how to serve as better representatives of the Local Education Agency (LEA), promote improved transition service delivery, and facilitate collaboration opportunities for special education teachers. This alignment between the literature and the present findings highlights the critical need for more robust leadership preparation programs to address these specific gaps in practice.

### **Ongoing Support and Program Implementation**

The theme of ongoing support and effective program implementation emerged as a critical factor in administrators' perceived role in delivering successful transition services. Administrators frequently emphasized the importance of sustained professional development, regular feedback, and continuous support for special education teachers to implement evidence-based practices successfully. In the narrative interviews, 5 out of 6 Alabama administrators referenced programs they had implemented in their schools. Each of these programs promoted improved transition services for all students, emphasizing professionalism, accountability, and exposure to successful stakeholders, including those receiving special education services. The implementation of these initiatives illustrates the administrators' commitment to inclusive curriculum design that encourages academic achievement, family and community engagement, and holistic student development (Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Sider et al., 2017).

This aligns with the findings discussed in Chapter Two, where research consistently highlights the need for continuous and inclusive support systems to improve teacher effectiveness in special education (Benitez et al., 2009). Furthermore, this reinforces key predictors of success outlined in Kohler's Taxonomy (Kohler et al., 2016), which emphasizes sustained collaboration and interagency support. Research shows that initial training alone is insufficient; special education teachers require ongoing, embedded professional development to adapt to the evolving needs of students and stay current with best practices in transition services (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Administrators in this study played a pivotal role in facilitating these support structures through mentoring, collaborative planning, and engagement with external stakeholders, further confirming literature that links strong administrative leadership with successful program implementation (Kohler et al., 2016).

Ongoing support is essential in maintaining a positive school climate, a key factor highlighted by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) as critical for individuals navigating transitions. These findings emphasize that a sustained commitment to program implementation and support from administrators not only enhances the quality of transition services but also equips special education teachers to better promote post-school success for students with disabilities.

### **Implications**

The findings from this study indicate that many administrators lack sufficient knowledge and training in special education transition services while recognizing the importance of collaborative efforts to drive improvement. This shows up throughout the administrator interviews. One administrator referenced their robust knowledge regarding special education law and the large gap that existed regarding special education program implementation and transition

service delivery. This gap underscores the critical need for ongoing and practical professional development opportunities tailored to administrators' needs regarding special education services. Well-trained school leaders are likely to enhance student outcomes by effectively supporting their special education teachers and their service delivery.

Collaboration emerged as a key theme, with administrators emphasizing the necessity of working alongside special education teachers, peer mentors, and stakeholders. Every administrator referenced their attention to collaboration, and the benefit intentional collaboration provided to them and the special education teachers they support. Multiple administrators acknowledged their lack of knowledge and reliance on veteran special education professionals to support transition service delivery. Strong collaborative practices not only foster an inclusive environment but also significantly enhance the delivery of transition services. To support this, districts should implement policies that mandate regular department meetings, establish ongoing peer mentoring programs, and forge partnerships with community organizations and other stakeholders. This type of structured collaboration could lead to more effective transitions for students with disabilities.

Additionally, administrators identified ongoing support and the implementation of new programs as crucial to their perceived role in promoting post-school success. Five out of six administrators excitedly shared about the programs that were implemented in their schools to help promote better post-school outcomes for all students. These programs support transition services and allow the administrators to further promote inclusion. As a result, school districts and leadership preparation programs must prioritize and expand training opportunities for administrators to encompass more in-depth special education policies, such as transition services and program planning. This ensures that administrators possess the necessary skills to support



their special education teachers and, in turn, facilitate improved student outcomes. The findings align with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive environment that enhances teacher effectiveness and ultimately leads to better student success.

### **Limitations**

While this study offers valuable insights into the perceptions of Alabama secondary school administrators regarding special education transition services, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. First, the study's qualitative design, which relied on interviews with a limited number of administrators, may not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of all school leaders across the state. Three of the administrators interviewed worked in the same school district, and 5 out of 6 administrators worked in Title 1 schools. This limited participant pool provides some limitations to the findings. Additionally, the focus on administrators from a specific geographic region (Alabama) may restrict the applicability of the findings to other contexts or regions with different educational policies and practices.

This study relies on administrators' self-reported data, which may introduce biases, as their perceptions may not always align with actual practices or outcomes. Their perceptions of their support and involvement may differ greatly from the perceptions of special education teachers. Understanding these limitations is essential for contextualizing the results and informing future research in the field of special education transition services.

### **Revisiting Positionality**

Although the findings from the narrative interviews and emergent themes aligned with my expectations, the absence of certain anticipated themes was unexpected. As a former special

education teacher in a Title I school and a current instructional coordinator in a post-secondary transition program for adults with disabilities, I anticipated the data to highlight an emphasis on affluence. It is commonly assumed and often suggested that students from affluent geographic areas and school systems inherently experience better post-school transition outcomes and receive more substantial administrative support.

By acknowledging and reflecting on my preconceived notions, I was able to approach the data with an open mind, enabling a deeper examination of administrators' perceptions and challenges. Interestingly, the study revealed that secondary administrators did not perceive a lack of funding and resources as a significant issue, contrary to my expectations. This realization prompted a reflexive approach throughout the analysis process, encouraging me to consider recommendations that enhance existing practices rather than focusing solely on resource allocation or adding duties or tasks for veteran special education teachers or district professionals. Ultimately, this allowed for the development of strategies aimed at supporting administrators in implementing more effective transition programs within their current structures.

This reflective process directly shaped my understanding of the data and informed the development of actionable recommendations. By recognizing the absence of certain anticipated themes and focusing on the challenges and perceptions highlighted by administrators, I crafted recommendations that build on existing practices and target key areas for improvement. The following recommendations are designed to support administrators in enhancing their capacity to implement effective transition programs, ultimately ensuring better post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

## **Recommendations**

The following section addresses the recommendations for administrators, leadership preparation programs, and state and district policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of special education transition services in Alabama secondary schools. Some of the key findings that influenced the recommendations in this section include the emergence of collaboration as a theme, administrator-reported lack of knowledge, and ongoing support and program implementation. To address these issues and promote successful post-school outcomes for students with disabilities, school districts, and leadership preparation programs need to implement targeted strategies.

One of the emergent themes identified through the thematic analysis of the narrative interviews is the importance of collaboration. To address the need for ongoing collaboration, administrators should structure teacher schedules to allow for district-wide department meetings, as well as opportunities for common planning with peer mentors. Facilitating time for these departmental meetings and time in teacher schedules to allow for peer mentoring meetings can enhance communication and teamwork, leading to improved service delivery for students with disabilities. Implementing and facilitating district-wide peer mentor programs between veteran and novice special education teachers also allows for increased collaboration.

Another emergent theme was the administrators' perceived need for ongoing support and program implementation to help promote a successful transition. Administrators and district policymakers should implement programs in high schools that facilitate opportunities for students with disabilities to be included and practice strategies that promote post-school success, like co-ops, peer mentorship programs, academic and vocational partnerships with external stakeholders, and advisory blocks. When implemented effectively and with special education professionals included, these programs promote post-school success by preparing students for a

range of outcomes, including employment, higher education, and independent living. Students with disabilities are regularly left out of school-wide programs, and including special education teachers in the creation and implementation of these programs to provide necessary accommodations leads to much more inclusion and success for students serviced through special education.

To address the lack of administrator knowledge expressed by all participants, another recommendation for future research is to explore how leadership preparation programs can incorporate opportunities for aspiring school leaders to engage meaningfully with special education professionals. This could include inviting special education teachers to serve on panels of guest speakers, hosting administrators who oversee special education to share their lived experiences and facilitating collaborative sessions where current administrators and special education teachers discuss the practical aspects of Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and other supports for students with disabilities. These initiatives would provide aspiring administrators with comprehensive, real-world insights into the implementation of essential skills required to support special education effectively.

To further address the gap in administrator knowledge regarding special education specifics and skill implementation, administrators with expertise in special education could develop targeted Professional Learning Units (PLUs). These PLUs would focus on educating current and aspiring administrators about transition requirements and evidence-based implementation practices. Beyond merely providing knowledge, these trainings could emphasize practical strategies for implementation and provide hands-on opportunities for practice. Such initiatives would foster continued professional growth and ensure administrators receive regular updates on the latest evidence-based practices in transition and special education. By

participating in these structured learning experiences, administrators would be better equipped with the practical tools and knowledge needed to effectively support special education teachers in delivering high-quality transition services. Furthermore, using evidence-based practices in transition education and services has been shown to significantly improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Kohler et al., 2016).

These recommendations aim to address the gaps identified in the study and promote the successful implementation of special education transition services.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to examine the perceptions of Alabama secondary school administrators regarding their involvement in special education transition services and their role in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities. Through a thematic analysis of narrative inquiry administrator interviews, this research aimed to identify the 1) facilitators to successful transition, 2) barriers to successful transition, and 3) strategies administrators employ to promote post-school success.

The findings from the study highlighted administrators' recognition of the importance of collaboration and peer mentoring in facilitating successful post-school transition. Administrators also referenced providing ongoing support and program implementation as effective strategies for promoting successful transition services. Although there were many facilitators supporting transition service delivery, such as collaboration between special education teachers and other special education experts and peer mentoring, the study also revealed major gaps in administrators' knowledge of evidence-based practices for special education transition planning, which highlighted the dire need for more comprehensive special education training and ongoing professional development.

The results align with both theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (2016), particularly the areas of Interagency Collaboration and Program Structures, was evident in the administrators' emphasis on creating supportive school environments and fostering peer mentorship experiences for teachers. The findings also resonate with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), repeatedly highlighting the critical role that school climate plays in shaping teachers' and administrators' experiences during the transition process.

The implications of this study suggest a clear need for school districts to prioritize professional development that focuses on special education transition services for administrators. Restructuring leadership preparation programs to include more in-depth special education training will also address the gaps in practical knowledge reported by administrators. Addressing these implications will ensure that administrators are equipped to support special education teachers and improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Future research could explore how to best design and implement collaborative structures that support both special education teachers and administrators in delivering effective, high-quality transition services.

In conclusion, this study offers critical insights into the facilitators and barriers that Alabama secondary school administrators face in supporting successful transition services. Addressing these gaps through collaborative efforts, ongoing professional development, program development, and a strong focus on school climate allows schools to better equip special education teachers and improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. By addressing and implementing these changes, future generations of students with disabilities can experience and access more successful transitions into post-school life, supported by well-prepared, knowledgeable administrators and educators.

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### Codebook

Variable	Question	Code	Description
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	EDU	General Education Degree
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	SPED	Special Education Degree
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	OTH	Other Degree
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	<5	LESS THAN 5



Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	5 - 10 YEARS	5 TO 10 YEARS
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	>10	MORE THAN 10
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	LEAD	LEADERSHIP
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	SPED FOCUS	SPECIAL EDUCATION FOCUS
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long	GRWTH	CAREER GROWTH

	you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).		
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	OTHER	OTHER
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	DIR	DIRECT INVOLVEMENNT
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	INV	INDIRECT INVOLVEMENT
Background Information	Please tell me a little about yourself (what your undergraduate degree was in, how long you taught in the classroom, why you went into administration, your proximity to special education).	NO INV	NO INVOLVEMENT

education).			
Challenges in Ensuring Training	Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that special education teachers in your school were well-trained and knowledgeable about providing evidence-based transition services. Include how you handled those challenges.	LOR	Lack of Resources
Challenges in Ensuring Training	Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that special education teachers in your school were well-trained and knowledgeable about providing evidence-based transition services. Include how you handled those challenges.	RES	Teacher Resistance
Challenges in Ensuring Training	Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that special education teachers in your school were well-trained and knowledgeable about providing evidence-based transition services. Include how you handled those challenges.	ITP	Inadequate Training Programs
Challenges in Ensuring Training	Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that	ADD TRN	Additional Training

	<p>special education teachers in your school were well-trained and knowledgeable about providing evidence-based transition services.</p> <p>Include how you handled those challenges.</p>		
Challenges in Ensuring Training	<p>Please share about a time when you encountered challenges in ensuring that special education teachers in your school were well-trained and knowledgeable about providing evidence-based transition services.</p> <p>Include how you handled those challenges.</p>	COL EXP	Collaboration with Experts
Effective Implementation	<p>Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school. Include how you created opportunities for that teacher to influence others.</p>	COL	Collaboration
Effective Implementation	<p>Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school. Include how you</p>	T INIT	Teacher Initiative

	created opportunities for that teacher to influence others.		
Effective Implementation	Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school. Include how you created opportunities for that teacher to influence others.	ADM SUP	Administrative Support
Effective Implementation	Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school. Include how you created opportunities for that teacher to influence others.	PM	Peer Mentoring
Effective Implementation	Please provide an example of a situation where you observed effective implementation of evidence-based transition services by special education teachers in your school. Include how you created opportunities for that teacher to influence others.	TRN SES	Training Sessions

influence others.			
Administrative Actions	Please describe any specific actions or initiatives you have taken or implemented that illustrates your role in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities.	SCH PRG	School-wide programs
Administrative Actions	Please describe any specific actions or initiatives you have taken or implemented that illustrates your role in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities.	NEW PRG	New programs
Administrative Actions	Please describe any specific actions or initiatives you have taken or implemented that illustrates your role in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities.	PRTNSHP	Partnerships
Administrative Actions	Please describe any specific actions or initiatives you have taken or implemented that illustrates your role in promoting post-school success for students with disabilities.	POL IMP	Policy Implementation
Reflection on Challenges	Reflecting on your experiences, can you highlight the most significant challenges you've encountered in ensuring that special education teachers are adequately trained	RES LIM	Resource Limitations

and knowledgeable in providing evidence-based transition services?			
Reflection on Challenges	Reflecting on your experiences, can you highlight the most significant challenges you've encountered in ensuring that special education teachers are adequately trained and knowledgeable in providing evidence-based transition services?	ST TOV	Staff Turnover
Reflection on Challenges	Reflecting on your experiences, can you highlight the most significant challenges you've encountered in ensuring that special education teachers are adequately trained and knowledgeable in providing evidence-based transition services?	CHG POL	Changing Policies
Reflection on Success	Reflecting on examples of special education teachers successfully providing evidence-based transition services in your school, please share how you see the key factors of their program being replicated in the future.	T COL	Teacher Collaboration
Reflection on Success	Reflecting on examples of special education teachers successfully providing evidence-based transition services in your school,	COM INV	Community Involvement

	<p>please share how you see the key factors of their program being replicated in the future.</p>		
<p>Reflection on Success</p>	<p>Reflecting on examples of special education teachers successfully providing evidence-based transition services in your school, please share how you see the key factors of their program being replicated in the future.</p>	<p>CONT PD</p>	<p>Continuous Professional Development</p>
<p>Lessons from Initiatives</p>	<p>Reflecting on a specific initiative or program you've implemented or participated in to promote post-school success for students with disabilities, what lessons have you learned from those experiences?</p>	<p>COL IMP</p>	<p>Importance of Collaboration</p>
<p>Lessons from Initiatives</p>	<p>Reflecting on a specific initiative or program you've implemented or participated in to promote post-school success for students with disabilities, what lessons have you learned from those experiences?</p>	<p>ONGO SUP</p>	<p>Need for Ongoing Support</p>
<p>Lessons from Initiatives</p>	<p>Reflecting on a specific initiative or program you've implemented or participated in to promote post-school success for students with disabilities, what lessons have you learned from those experiences?</p>	<p>FLEX IMP</p>	<p>Flexibility in Implementation</p>



# Approved IRB

Revised 09/13/2023

1

AUBURN UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM (HRPP)

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## EXEMPT REVIEW APPLICATION

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For assistance, contact: **The Office of Research Compliance (ORC)**

Phone: 334-844-5966 E-Mail: [IRBAdmin@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBAdmin@auburn.edu) Web Address: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs>

**Submit completed form and supporting materials as one PDF through the [IRB Submission Page](#)**

**Hand written forms are not accepted. Where links are found hold down the control button (Ctrl) then click the link.**

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### 1. Project Identification

Today's Date: **March 24, 2024**

Anticipated start date of the project: **April 15, 2024** Anticipated duration of project: **4 months**

a. Project Title: **Transition Service Competency Scale**

b. Principal Investigator (PI): **Emmaree Wilson** Degree(s): **Ph.D.** Rank/Title:  
Graduate Student Department/School: **Educational Foundations, Leadership, and  
Technology**

Role/responsibilities in this project: **I am the principal investigator gathering data on transition services provided by local high school administrators. I will be designing the study, collecting data, and analyzing data.**

Preferred Phone Number: **334-796-5259** AU Email: [emw0027@auburn.edu](mailto:emw0027@auburn.edu)

Faculty Advisor Principal Investigator (if applicable): **Dr. Lisa Kensler**

Rank/Title: **Professor** Department/School: **Educational Foundations, Leadership, and  
Technology**

Role/responsibilities in this project: **Dr. Kensler is my dissertation committee chair. She provides guidance on the design of the study, provides guidance on data collection, and gives feedback on analysis.**

Preferred Phone Number: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

AU Email: [lak0008@auburn.edu](mailto:lak0008@auburn.edu)

Department Head: **Dr. Hank Murrah**

Preferred Phone Number: **334-844-3806**

Department/School: **Educational Foundations, Leadership, and  
Technology**

Role/responsibilities in this project: **Dr. Murrah is the**

department head and provides any needed guidance on  
the study.

AU Email: [wmm0017@auburn.edu](mailto:wmm0017@auburn.edu)

c. **Project Key Personnel** – Identify all key personnel who will be involved with the conduct of the research and describe their role in the project. Role may include design, recruitment, consent process, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. ([To determine key personnel, see decision tree.](#)) *Exempt determinations are made by individual institutions; reliance on other institutions for exempt determination is not feasible. Non-AU personnel conducting exempt research activities must obtain approval from the IRB at their home institution.*

Key personnel are required to maintain human subjects training through [CITI](#). Please provide documentation of completed CITI training, with course title(s) and expiration date(s) shown. As a reminder, both IRB and RCR modules are required for all key study personnel.

Name: **Emmaree Wilson**

Degree(s): **Ph.D.**

Rank/Title: **Graduate Student**  
Leadership, and Technology

Department/School: **Educational Foundations,**

Role/responsibilities in this project: **Principal Investigator**

- AU affiliated?  Yes  No If no, name of home institution: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

- Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Do you have any known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or other interests that could have influence or appear to have influence on the work conducted in this project?  Yes  No
- If yes, briefly describe the potential or real conflict of interest: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Completed required CITI training?  Yes  No If NO, complete the appropriate [CITI basic course](#) and update the revised Exempt Application form.
- If YES, choose course(s) the researcher has completed: Human Sciences Basic Course      2/8/2027  
[Choose a course](#)      [Expiration Date](#)

**Name:** Lisa Kensler      **Degree(s):** Ed.D Rank/Title: Professor/Committee Chair  
 Department/School: Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Technology Role/responsibilities in this project: Dr. Kensler is my dissertation committee chair. She provides guidance on the design of the study, provides guidance on data collection, and gives feedback on analysis.

- AU affiliated?  Yes  No If no, name of home institution: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Do you have any known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or other interests that could have influence or appear to have influence on the work conducted in this project?  Yes  No
- If yes, briefly describe the potential or real conflict of interest: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Completed required CITI training?  Yes  No If NO, complete the appropriate [CITI basic course](#) and update the revised EXEMPT application form.
- If YES, choose course(s) the researcher has completed: IRB #2 Social and Behavioral      September 26, 2026  
RCR      [Expiration Date](#)

**Name:** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)      **Degree(s):** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)  
**Rank/Title:** [Choose Rank/Title](#)      **Department/School:** [Choose Department/School](#)  
**Role/responsibilities in this project:** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

- AU affiliated?  Yes  No If no, name of home institution: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Do you have any known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or other interests that could have influence or appear to have influence on the work conducted in this project?  Yes  No
- If yes, briefly describe the potential or real conflict of interest: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Completed required CITI training?  Yes  No If NO, complete the appropriate [CITI basic course](#) and update the revised EXEMPT application form.
- If YES, choose course(s) the researcher has completed: [Choose a course](#)      [Expiration Date](#)  
[Choose a course](#)      [Expiration Date](#)

- d. Funding Source** – Is this project funded by the investigator(s)? Yes  No   
 Is this project funded by AU? Yes  No  If YES, identify source [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)  
 Is this project funded by an external sponsor? Yes  No  If YES, provide name of sponsor, type of sponsor (governmental, non-profit, corporate, other), and an identification number for the award.  
**Name:** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)      **Type:** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)      **Grant #:** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- e.** List other AU IRB-approved research projects and/or IRB approvals from other institutions that are associated with this project. Describe the association between this project and the listed project(s):  
[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

## 2. Project Summary

**a. Does the study TARGET any special populations? Answer YES or NO to all.**

Minors (under 18 years of age; if minor participants, at least 2 adults must be present during all research procedures that include the minors)	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Auburn University Students	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Pregnant women, fetuses, or any products of conception	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Prisoners or wards (unless incidental, not allowed for Exempt research)	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Temporarily or permanently impaired	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**b. Does the research pose more than minimal risk to participants? Yes  No** 

*If YES, to question 2.b, then the research activity is NOT eligible for EXEMPT review. Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or test. 42 CFR 46.102(i)*

**c. Does the study involve any of the following? If YES to any of the questions in item 2.c, then the research activity is NOT eligible for EXEMPT review.**

Procedures subject to FDA regulations (drugs, devices, etc.)	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Use of school records of identifiable students or information from instructors about specific students.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Protected health or medical information when there is a direct or indirect link which could identify the participant.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Collection of sensitive aspects of the participant's own behavior, such as illegal conduct, drug use, sexual behavior or alcohol use.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**d. Does the study include deception? Requires limited review by the IRB\* Yes  No** **3. MARK the category or categories below that describe the proposed research. Note the IRB Reviewer will make the final determination of the eligible category or categories.**

1. Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices. The research is not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn or assessment of educators providing instruction. 104(d)(1)

2. Research only includes interactions involving educational tests, surveys, interviews, public observation if at least ONE of the following criteria. (The research includes data collection only; may include visual or auditory recording; may NOT include intervention and only includes interactions). **Mark the applicable sub-category below (i, ii, or iii). 104(d)(2)**

(i) Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly or indirectly/ linked);

**OR**

- surveys and interviews: no children;
- educational tests or observation of public behavior: can only include children when investigators do not participate in activities being observed.

(ii) Any disclosures of responses outside would not reasonably place participant at risk; **OR**

(iii) Information is recorded with identifiers or code linked to identifiers and IRB conducts limited review; no children. **Requires limited review by the IRB.\***

3. Research involving Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)\*\* through verbal, written responses including data entry or audiovisual recording from adult subjects who prospectively agree and ONE of the following criteria is met. (This research does not include children and does not include medical interventions. Research cannot have deception unless the participant prospectively agrees that they will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature and purpose of the research) **Mark the applicable sub-category below (A, B, or C).**

104(d)(3)(i)

(A) Recorded information cannot readily identify the subject (directly or indirectly/ linked); **OR**

(B) Any disclosure of responses outside of the research would not reasonably place subject at risk;  
**OR**

(C) Information is recorded with identifies and cannot have deception unless participants prospectively agree.  
**Requires limited review by the IRB.\***

4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: use of identifiable information or identifiable bio-specimen that have been or will be collected for some other 'primary' or 'initial' activity, if one of the following criteria is met. Allows retrospective and prospective secondary use. **Mark the applicable sub-category below (i, ii, iii, or iv).** 104 (d)(4)

(i) Bio-specimens or information are publicly available;

(ii) Information recorded so subject cannot readily be identified, directly or indirectly/linked investigator does not contact subjects and will not re-identify the subjects; **OR**

(iii) Collection and analysis involving investigators use of identifiable health information when us is regulated by HIPAA "health care operations" or "research" or "public health activities and purposes" (does not include bio-specimens (only PHI and requires federal guidance on how to apply); **OR**

(iv) Research information collected by or on behalf of federal government using government generated or collected information obtained for non-research activities.

5. Research and demonstration projects which are supported by a federal agency/department AND designed to study and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or service under those programs. (must be posted on a federal web site). 104.5(d)(5) (must be posted on a federal web site)

6. Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives and consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The research does not involve prisoners as participants. 104(d)(6)

*\*Limited IRB review – the IRB Chair or designated IRB reviewer reviews the protocol to ensure adequate provisions are in place to protect privacy and confidentiality.*

*\*\*Category 3 – Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI) must be brief in duration, painless/harmless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on participants, and it is unlikely participants will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing.*

*\*\*\* Exemption categories 7 and 8 require broad consent. The AU IRB has determined the regulatory requirements for legally effective broad consent are not feasible within the current institutional infrastructure. EXEMPT categories 7 and 8 will not be implemented at this time.*

**4. Describe the proposed research including who does what, when, where, how, and for how long, etc.**

**a. Purpose**

This qualitative study will investigate secondary school administrators' perceptions of their role in the post-school transition process for students with disabilities. This research will provide recommendations for improving administrator involvement in their school's transition program. This understanding will provide insights to school administrators in Alabama to support ongoing professional development for administrators, increased collaboration between administrators and special education teachers, increased administrator knowledge and skills of the transition process, and improved quality Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

**b. Participant population, including the number of participants and the rationale for determining number of participants to recruit and enroll. Note if the study enrolls minor participants, describe the process to ensure more than 1 adult is present during all research procedures which include the minor.**

All secondary school principals and assistant principals in the state of Alabama are the target population. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling and solicited by email. Additional participants will be identified by snowball sampling. This will continue until a maximum of ten administrators meet the criteria after initial phone calls. Each participant will be asked to volunteer through email. A list of administrators' e-mail addresses will be obtained through the Alabama Principal Directory.

**c. Recruitment process. Address whether recruitment includes communications/interactions between study staff and potential participants either in person or online. *Submit a copy of all recruitment materials.*** ).

Using purposive sampling, administrators will be selected by district special education coordinator recommendations, and recommendations from program directors from Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs (IPSEs). Special education coordinators have knowledge of administrators in their districts who are committed to inclusion and knowledgeable about special education services, and IPSE program directors have knowledge regarding schools with strong transition programs. Participation will be solicited online through email, using contact information obtained through the ALSDE website. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling and solicited by email. Additional participants will be identified by snowball sampling.

**d. Consent process including how information is presented to participants, etc.**

Participants (Alabama high school administrators) will be identified and contacted using contact information obtained from the ALSDE website. An information letter and letter of consent (not requiring a signature) will be initially provided to all school administrators via email. Administrators will receive the letters via email immediately after being identified. Participants will have to use the links provided in the information letter to schedule initial phone calls, so that will serve as the verification that the information letter was received.

**e. Research procedures and methodology**

The research design implemented for this study will be narrative inquiry interviews. Narrative inquiry interviews will provide in-depth data regarding school administrators' self-reported knowledge of special education transition protocols and how they interpret their role in the post-school transition process for students receiving special education

services. This data will help answer the research questions. The narrative inquiry interview is composed of six open-ended questions. The data will be analyzed by using a conceptual content analysis. This method involves identifying and analyzing underlying concepts, ideas, and themes in the qualitative data to understand the deeper meaning (Palmer, 2023). Participants will be selected using purposive sampling and solicited by emails obtained from the Alabama Principal Directory. Additional participants will be identified by snowball sampling. This will continue until a maximum of ten administrators meet the criteria during initial phone calls and participate in interviews.

- f. Anticipated time per study exercise/activity and total time if participants complete all study activities. The anticipated time for participants to complete the initial phone screener is 30 minutes, and the anticipated time for participants to complete the interview is approximately 1 hour. If participants complete both study activities, it will take approximately 1 and a half hour.
- g. Location of the research activities. Interviews will be conducted virtually via Zoom.
- h. Costs to and compensation for participants? If participants will be compensated describe the amount, type, and process to distribute. \$0
- i. Non-AU locations, site, institutions. *Submit a copy of agreements/IRB approvals. N/A*
- j. Describe how results of this study will be used (presentation? publication? thesis? dissertation?) The results will be used for completion of my dissertation.
- k. Additional relevant information. *N/A*

#### 5. Waivers

Check applicable waivers and describe how the project meets the criteria for the waiver.

- Waiver of Consent (Including existing de-identified data)
- Waiver of Documentation of Consent (Use of Information Letter, rather than consent form requiring signatures)
- Waiver of Parental Permission (in Alabama, 18 years-olds may be considered adults for research purposes)

<https://sites.auburn.edu/admin/orc/irb/IRB 1 Exempt and Expedited/11-113 MR 1104 Hinton Renewal 2021-1.pdf>

- a. Provide the rationale for the waiver request. Participants will receive an information letter and choose to participate in the interviews, so the information letter will be used in lieu of the consent form requiring signatures. Participants will be informed that general descriptors and pseudonyms will be assigned, and no identifying information will be shared. Email addresses will be collected in case follow-up interviews or clarification on interview questions is required.

6. Describe the process to select participants/data/specimens. If applicable, include gender, race, and ethnicity of the participant population.

The information will be disseminated to all secondary school principals and assistant principals in the state of Alabama. Using purposive sampling, administrators will be selected by district special education coordinator recommendations, and recommendations from program directors from Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs (IPSEs). Special education coordinators have knowledge of administrators in their districts who are committed to inclusion and knowledgeable about special education services, and IPSE program directors have knowledge regarding schools with strong transition programs. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling and solicited by email. Additional participants will be identified by snowball sampling. This will continue until a maximum of ten administrators meet the criteria after initial phone calls and participate in interviews. Each participant will be asked to volunteer through email. A list of administrators' e-mail addresses will be obtained through the Alabama Principal Directory.

During the initial identification phone call, administrators should be able to:

- Identify the 3 diploma pathways for students with disabilities.
- Identify their schools transition services offered (if their school has a 12<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond program, Essentials Work Credit course, etc.).
- Identify state funded services that come in to collaborate with students exiting special education programs in their schools (Vocational Rehabilitation)
- Identify the requirement of IEPs to include transition services for high school students.
- Confirm that they currently work in or have worked in a secondary public school that provided services to students receiving special education services.

## 7. Risks and Benefits

**7a. Risks - Describe why none of the research procedures would cause a participant either physical or psychological discomfort or be perceived as discomfort above and beyond what the person would experience in daily life (minimal risk).**

The interviews won't cause any physical or psychological discomfort beyond what they experience daily because the purpose is only to gather information regarding their school's transition program in hopes of improving the program in the future, allowing them to be a part of the improvement process.

**7b. Benefits – Describe whether participants will benefit directly from participating in the study. If yes, describe the benefit. And describe generalizable benefits resulting from the study.**

Participants may benefit from engaging in reflective conversations regarding transition and special education services. The study itself will benefit the field of special education, education, and transition by providing more insight into secondary administrator perceptions regarding transition services and facilitators and barriers to administrator involvement.

**8. Describe the provisions to maintain confidentiality of data, including collection, transmission, and storage. Identify platforms used to collect and store study data. For EXEMPT research, the AU IRB recommends AU BOX or using an AU issued and encrypted device. If a data collection form will be used, submit a copy.**

The data collected (interview data) will be stored in Auburn University's cloud storage, Box. Participant emails will be collected, but no identifying information be shared. Pseudonyms and generic descriptors will be used (rural high school principal).

- a. If applicable, submit a copy of the data management plan or data use agreement.

**9. Describe the provisions included in the research to protect the privacy interests of participants (e.g., others will not overhear conversations with potential participants, individuals will not be publicly identified or embarrassed).**

Participants will be able to schedule interviews at a time that is convenient for them to protect their privacy. Individuals will not be publicly identified and will be informed that they will only be identified as "secondary school principals from rural/city school districts" and given a pseudonym.

**10. Does this research include purchase(s) that involve technology hardware, software or online services?**

YES  NO If YES:

- A. Provide the name of the product Click or tap here to enter text.  
and the manufacturer of the product Click or tap here to enter text.
- B. Briefly describe use of the product in the proposed human subject's research.  
Click or tap here to enter text.
- C. To ensure compliance with AU's Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Policy, contact AU IT Vendor Vetting team at [vetting@auburn.edu](mailto:vetting@auburn.edu) to learn the vendor registration process (prior to completing the purchase).
- D. Include a copy of the documentation of the approval from AU Vetting with the revised submission.

**11. Additional Information and/or attachments.**

*In the space below, provide any additional information you believe may help the IRB review of the proposed research. If attachments are included, list the attachments below. Attachments may include recruitment materials, consent documents, site permissions, IRB approvals from other institutions, data use agreements, data collection form, CITI training documentation, etc.*

*Recruitment materials, information letters, CITI training documentation, and survey and interview questions are attached.*

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**Required Signatures** (If a student PI is identified in item 1.a, the EXEMPT application must be re-signed and updated at every revision by the student PI and faculty advisor. The signature of the department head is required only on the initial submission of the EXEMPT application, regardless of PI. Staff and faculty PI submissions require the PI signature on all version, the department head signature on the original submission)

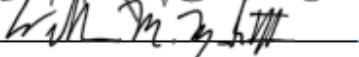
Signature of Principal Investigator: Emmanuel Wilson Date: 04/01/2024





Revised 09/13/2023

Signature of Faculty Advisor (if applicable):  Date: April 2, 2024

Signature of Dept. Head:  Date: 04/02/2024

Version Date: 2/11/2024

Recruitment Poster

# PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW!



Click the link or scan the QR code to sign up for an initial phone screener for a chance to be selected for an interview. This study will help improve post-secondary transition services for special education students across Alabama!

DON'T MISS OUT!



### What's in Store For You?

- Improving Transition Programs ✓
- More Collaboration ✓
- More Knowledge of Special Education Services ✓
- Fresh PD Ideas for Teachers ✓

**INTERVIEW PROCESS**

- Quick and easy phone screener!
- Responses will be kept confidential!

**LINK: [CLICK HERE](#)**

**DEADLINE FOR PARTICIPATION**

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2024**

## Information Letter



AUBURN UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

You are invited to complete a focus group as part of a research study entitled "Examining school administrators' perceived involvement in special education transition services related to promoting post-school success." We seek to understand teachers' knowledge, experience, and challenges in supporting their schools' transition programs. This study is being conducted by Emmaree Wilson, an employee of the EAGLES Program and a Ph.D. student in Auburn University's College of Education.

**What will be involved if you participate?** If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that explores your background knowledge and perception of supporting transition programs for secondary special education students. There will be an initial phone screener. The initial phone screener will take approximately 30 minutes, and the interview will take approximately one hour.

**Are there any risks or discomforts?** There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer, and you can quit the study at any time.

**Are there any benefits to yourself and others?** Participants may benefit from engaging in reflective conversations regarding transition and special education services. The study itself will benefit the field of special education, education, and transition by providing more insight into secondary administrator perceptions regarding transition services and facilitators and barriers to administrator involvement

**Will you receive compensation for participating?** There is no compensation being offered in exchange for participation in this study.

**Are there any costs involved with participating?** There are no costs associated with participation in this study other than the time you spend participating in the study.


Your participation is completely voluntary. All information that is shared with us will remain confidential. If we use any direct quotations from the study, they will be attributed to a generic descriptor and a pseudonym (e.g., Gene, a high school administrator from a county school). Information obtained through your participation may be included in a dissertation publication. If you have any questions about this study, please ask them prior to taking the survey or contact Emmaree Wilson at [emw0027@auburn.edu](mailto:emw0027@auburn.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board at [IRBadmin@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBadmin@auburn.edu) or (334) 844-5966.

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460; Fax: 334-844-3072


w w w . a u b u r n . e d u


Link to sign up for a phone screener: [Click Here](#)

## Initial Email

 **Emmaree Wilson** <emw...> Monday, June 10, 2024 at 8:00...

**Bcc:** msmothers@wcsclass.com; [+329 more](#) ▾

 Information Letter- d...  
136.5 KB ▾

 Research Participant...  
3 MB ▾

[Download All](#) • [Preview All](#)

Hello!

My name is Emmaree Wilson! I am a Ph.D. student in Administration at Auburn University, and I am **requesting** your **participation** in a study that will help improve secondary special education transition programs across the state of Alabama! Please see the flyer below to participate and share with other secondary principals and assistant principals!

I look **forward** to connecting with you. Have a wonderful summer!