

# Special Education: The Road of Accountability or Scapegoating

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## Abstract

The role and responsibility of educators are to support the learning of all students, including those who have unique educational and/or functional needs. However, many schools fall victim to assuming the services and support of special education is to address at-risk students who demonstrate learning difficulties rather than learning disabilities. Furthermore, special education is not and should not be considered an equitable response to school failures. Implications of the leadership decisions made at Greenway Elementary School, pseudonym for case study purposes, are discussed through viewing the organizational program from different lenses. The current educational system needs to do more to fulfill their role in educating students in the general education setting and in providing interventions consistently, effectively, and with fidelity.

**Keywords:** Special education; Principal; Educational need; Referral; Interventions; Leadership

**Abbreviations:** SPED: Special Education; AI: Auditory Impairment; DB: Deaf-Blindness; ED: Emotional Disturbance; ID: Intellectual Disability; MD: Multiple Disabilities; OI: Orthopedic Impairment; OHI: Other Health Impairment; SLD: Specific Learning Disability; SI: Speech Impairment; TBI: Traumatic Brain Injury; VI: Visual Impairment; NCEC: Non-Categorical Early Childhood; RtI: Response to Intervention; IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

## Special Education: The Road of Accountability or Scapegoating

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the Code of Federal Regulations 34 CFR 300.8 (a) [1], children with a disability are eligible for special education and related services when the disability has an adverse effect on the educational performances of the student. In the law, Congress states:

*Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities [2].*

Under IDEA, Texas has determined that eligibility for students aged 3-21 to receive special education services and support fall under one or more of the 13 disability categories [3]:

- i. Auditory Impairment (AI)
- ii. Autism (AU)
- iii. Deaf-Blindness (DB)
- iv. Emotional Disturbance (ED)
- v. Intellectual Disability (ID)
- vi. Multiple Disabilities (MD)
- vii. Orthopedic Impairment (OI)
- viii. Other Health Impairment (OHI)
- ix. Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
- x. Speech Impairment (SI)
- xi. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- xii. Visual Impairment (VI)
- xiii. Non-Categorical Early Childhood (NCEC)

## Case Narrative

Greenway Elementary School is one of 58 public elementary campuses in Harmony Independent School District located in Texas. The school consists of 1,077 students. As reported by the Texas Education Agency, 11.1% of the student population is served under special education (SPED) programming. Greenway Elementary School has earned exemplary status in the district due to its high academic achievement compared to other elementary schools in the area. All staff members of that campus are required to participate in ongoing professional development sessions prior to the start of the school year, as well as during the school year.

There has been an increase in the student population identified for services and support in SPED throughout the state of Texas. Although there have been concerns regarding the over-identification and inappropriate placement of students in SPED, educators of Greenway Elementary School continue to make referrals for SPED testing when students struggle in the classroom. These concerns necessitate a careful examination of the referral-to-placement process, the implementation process of Response to Intervention (RtI), instructional approaches and teacher efficacy, administrative support, and overall knowledge and understanding of learning difficulties versus learning disabilities.

As implemented in most public schools, the SPED system is targeted to function as a means to minimize the impact of student failure on the school as a whole. When viewed as a bureaucratic organization, public schools serve as units intended to assist in the implementation of IDEA of 2004 requirement and supplementary federal educational policies. In the case of Greenway Elementary School, the campus views student failures because of the student's disability rather than the result of instructional quality or other factors centering around the school situation. This functionalist approach is skewed because special education is neither rational nor efficient.

a. Disabilities are identified through objective AND subjective measures – results of cognitive assessments can be interpreted differently from district to district.

b. Diagnoses do not directly mean there will be an instructional benefit because it relies on the quality of instruction and many other factors.

Regarding the referral process at Greenway Elementary School, there are many problematic factors: (a) increased demands of teacher workload, (b) large classroom size, (c) increased curricular tasks that must be incorporated in their daily lesson plans, (d) lack of understanding of proper implementation of intervention, (e) lack of differentiated instruction, (f) lack of support and guidance of administrators due to campus-related concerns that take precedence, and (g) lack of knowledge and understanding of the difference between learning difficulties versus learning disabilities. These are important issues to address

as teachers initiate most referrals for SPED assessments and referrals that often lead to placement.

Regarding the RtI, educators at Greenway are often rushed to get struggling students the help that is needed as quickly as possible. The campus and district do provide guidelines to implementing RtI; however, often, educators attempt the intervention for only a short time without proper opportunity to document the impact of the intervention before checking the intervention strategy off the list as ineffective. The practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions should match the student's need and progress should be monitored frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals. Effective implementation of RtI requires leadership, collaborative planning, and implementation by all educational professionals. However, at Greenway, there is no single, well-integrated system that connects general, remedial, and SPED through scientific-based practices.

Regarding the overall knowledge and understanding of learning difficulties versus learning disabilities, administrative support and collaboration is needed and should be a focal area throughout the year. At Greenway, efforts to improve understanding and knowledge in the referral process and of learning disabilities have been made through professional development sessions requested by the campus diagnostician as part of the beginning of the year procedure. Through this procedure, teachers gain awareness of the characteristics of learning disabilities and nonrestrictive strategies to use with struggling students. The administrators, who are charged with starting the referral process with the parents, also have a better understanding of appropriate data to be obtained to consider moving forward with the referral or trying more interventions. Although improvement and progress in teacher, administrator, and parent understanding of the RtI process have been observed, more needs to be done to improve the overall understanding of how to better implement interventions with fidelity prior to a referral for SPED evaluation.

There are many potential courses of action with consequences that are tied to this issue. Analysis of the referral-to-placement process, the implementation RtI, and the overall knowledge and understanding of learning difficulties versus learning disabilities is critical. Schools not only have to maintain a structure that conforms to the technical demands of their work but also the cultural demands of their institutionalized environment (e.g., the expectation of consumers).

## Teaching Notes

This case is designed to lead educators to consider the implications of leadership decisions through a structural, cultural, trust, and power/political lens. Educators can examine the effects of the decisions of a school leader. Greenway Elementary School needs to support its staff, students, and guardians in their implementation of instructional interventions and fundamental educational methodology. The school leader holds many roles and

responsibilities with the purpose of providing a good learning environment. However, the top-down decisions made, as is common in many organizations, impact the appropriateness of special education services and the instructional practices to all students. Through different lenses, readers can examine and conceptualize the factors that lead to the organizational problem and consider steps that can be taken to accomplish the goal of helping students learn in the least restrictive environment and maintain a positive school culture.

### Structural Frame Lens

Differentiation and integration are basic but integral constructs of large organizations such as the school system and more particularly special education. There exists a need to examine the internal functioning of the school with a critical lens as the school positions itself as an active system with a complex hierarchy. To this study, an *organization* is defined as a systematized body of individuals who create and operate a system grounded by a common goal through interconnected behaviors and actions. *Differentiation* is defined as the distribution of labor or tasks, or how the work is divided. *Integration* is defined as the synchronization of individual work once the roles are allocated. Clear expectations of an individual's role, routines, and rules can help to provide equality and equity, especially in special education where deviation or non-compliance could lead to costly and stressful litigation proceedings.

Through a structural frame, the organizational problem of appropriate referral and placement of special education services will be discussed. To support the collective goal, as well as the individual differences, specific assumptions of the school has been established: (a) the school exists to achieve the established goal and objective that all students can learn, (b) the effectiveness of the school's performance can be achieved through appropriate division of tasks and specialization, (c) management and monitoring is necessary to safeguard different approaches of instruction from individual staff members and ensuring that these efforts align with the overall programming, (d) schools are more successful through consistency instead of individual subjectivity and undue stress factors, (e) organizational frame should target the present needs of the school, and (f) analyzing and modifying action steps can assist to diminish problems and performance-related issues that may impact the overall structure of the school.

Leading special education programming calls for a principal who is not only cognizant of the federal regulations that govern special education, but the principal must also provide educators in his or her school with tools and instructional strategies to work with struggling students before considering referral for special education. The principal must thoughtfully group staff members into working units with multiple considerations, such as (a) teacher groups based on the knowledge or skill, (b) paraprofessionals and support teachers based on the instructional schedule, (c) groups

planned by the subject area where support is needed, (d) the assignment of teachers or staff members based on the individual student, (e) the assignment of staff members based on the location where the services are needed, and (f) the assignment based on the process. No one grouping will be sufficient, and careful consideration of how each grouping intertwines and affects other groupings is key to the successful execution of instructional activities for all students. Faculty morale will also increase when clear expectations of their role and duties are made.

The principal must factor in the antecedent issues that affect inappropriate referrals: (a) increased demands of teacher workload, (b) large classroom size, (c) increased curricular tasks that must be incorporated in their daily lesson plans, (d) lack of understanding of proper implementation of intervention, (e) lack of differentiated instruction, (f) lack of support and guidance of administrators due to campus-related concerns that take precedence, and (g) lack of knowledge and understanding of the difference between learning difficulties versus learning disabilities. School leaders can utilize vertical and lateral coordination to align individual and group efforts to the common goal of all students can learn.

Administration in the school system has evolved into a hierarchy of specialized offices or departments. This bureaucratic structure is evident through the specialization of teaching by core content area, differentiated grade levels, and special programs (e.g., Bilingual, English as a second language, vocational, and special education). Administrative personnel responsible for supervising instruction has also accounted for this bureaucratic structure - assistant principals at Greenway oversee instruction and curriculum of specific grade-level teachers, instructional specialists support teachers in the specific content area, and at the district level there are curriculum directors, academic coaches, and coordinators. Greenway Elementary School's organizational structure and formal designation of work for administrators and staff members affect the school's production and effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Schools not only have to maintain a structure that conforms to the technical demands of their work but also the cultural demands of their institutionalized environment (e.g., the expectation of consumers). Contradicting efforts: however, when the demands are combined and viewed in terms of one system working inside the other, we can come to understand how vertical and lateral coordination can be used to enhance the functionality of the school.

Vertical coordination occurs through a formal chain of command where there is a designated supervisory figure (e.g., school principal), identified rules and policies, and an established system for planning and control. This system can be viewed as the normative structure that functions on the outside. This outside system conforms with a machine bureaucracy where people (e.g.,

staff, parents, community members) expect this type of structure because there is a division of work, and the overall outcome is identified and understood. Greenway Elementary School's vertical coordination can be understood through the simple chain of command that keeps the school functioning – staff members know who to go to for help, parents know who to contact when questions and concerns arise, and district members know who to contact when further directives or inquiries are made.

Lateral coordination occurs through committees, meetings, and networking structures. This type of coordination is less formal and has a degree of flexibility. At Greenway, lateral coordination occurs through regularly held administrative meetings every Monday from 11:30 am to 3:00 pm - members include the principal, assistant principals, school counselor, educational diagnostician, instructional specialists, school nurse, and technology specialist/librarian. The Tuesdays that follow the administrative meetings, instructional specialists meet with grade-level teachers to share the instructional information that was discussed at the administrative meetings and guide these educators on targeted areas of improvement and strategies to be implemented. The Thursdays are then designated for lead teachers of each grade level to meet with peers to discuss the student progress based on the strategies designated from the meeting with the instructional specialists.

Greenway's principal designed a structure that logistically functions well; however, there are areas of needed improvement. At times, the top-down command and control impact the morale of the staff members as they feel as if there is no say or room for their opinions. Vertical coordination may be efficient but with some teacher's unwillingness to follow directives, this coordination may prove to be not as effective as desired. Lateral coordination helps to balance out the rigidity of the top-down commands and provides room for creativity and flexibility in instructional approaches. Although this type of coordination is more effective, this approach can be costlier and more time-consuming. Time is a big factor at Greenway. Meetings prove to create more work and consume more of the educator's time - it is difficult to coordinate times for meetings that work with every member of the team sometimes. Matrix structures and network are needed to link and integrate structures but are difficult to manage. Greenway, like many schools, needs to utilize both vertical and lateral coordination. However, because Greenway has a large teacher turnover, a revolving door for student transfers, and demanding parents, the environment is not stable, and tasks are not well understood or predictable. Therefore, vertical coordination must not be at the forefront. Lateral coordination will work best at Greenway as the environment is ever-changing. This may not always be the case, and leaders must remember to find a design that works for the current situation of that school.

To lessen issues regarding inappropriate referrals at Greenway Elementary School, the principal should consider utilizing the

educational diagnostician and special education teacher to form campus-based professional development opportunities at the beginning of the school year for all staff members rather than small group meeting with just general education teachers who are assigned to support students with disabilities. Consistency and clear understanding of what and how to monitor student progress can alleviate confusion between learning difficulties and learning disabilities across the whole campus.

The demands on staff members put on by the campus principal have caused tension and difficulties arose from lots of individuals doing too many different things. Roles and responsibilities start to overlap, which causes some tasks to fall through the cracks while other tasks are being worked on by too many individuals. The deviation of the workload is often unfair at Greenway. Workers who are fast, efficient, and reliable are placed with more work, while those individuals who are not as quick and only do the job at the bare minimum are given fewer responsibilities - this creates tension and burnout among staff members. Some paraprofessionals and teachers at Greenway are unclear about what they are supposed to do; therefore, their actions may not be aligned to the common goal. Then there are certain groups of teachers (e.g., special education teachers) where the parameters of their job are defined at every corner. This creates undue stress and anxiety as there is no flexibility to their performance as a teacher to meet the unique needs of each individual student. Self-contained classrooms exist at Greenway in both general education and special education. The expectation is for all members to form relationships; however, this is a difficult task to achieve when self-contained teachers are isolated, and lack of time does not allow these teachers the opportunity to form these relationships, which then creates difficult working environment when other teachers appear to have the time to talk in the hallway or hang out in the lounge. The structure in certain areas of the school is too loose and staff members go about their own way, while other parts of the school are tightly handled. Greenway needs to be more uniform as an organization.

### Cultural Frame Lens

In a theoretical mindset and viewed under a cultural frame, organizations are essentially bodies of collective thoughts and actions of the people. People are tasked with the construction of social realities through idiosyncratic communication. Therefore, the way individuals create, decompose, and restructure meaning and how this process correlates to the approach in which behaviors and exchanges unfurl over time creates the existence of the organizational reality. Many individuals will stress the notion that people construct and reconstruct the realities of their organization, while others will call attention to the concept that the realities of an organization construct and reconstruct the people. The cultural frame of reference for organizations consequently lay in a dichotomous state where people build culture and culture build people.

Through a cultural frame, the organizational problem of appropriate referral and placement of special education services will be discussed to have a better understanding of how the culture of Greenway may impact the stated organizational problem. Greenway Elementary School, like many organizations, can be conceptualized as having a shared system of meaning. This paradigm constitutes a cause-and-effect relationship in their standards and practice, as well as the behaviors in which the organization functions. Culture functions as the glue that connects the organization by bringing together people who work toward the organizational goal. The culture at Greenway can be revealed through its symbols, which includes the vision/goals, hero/heroine, and rituals/ceremonies.

Any persons stepping foot onto the property of Greenway will immediately be aware of the priorities and focal point of the campus. Safety for the students and staff members is a top priority; measures include newly installed bulletproof glass windows and doors, cameras and two-way person-controlled entryway, and purposeful “man-trap” were installed to regulate the traffic and the access in and out of the school premises. Depictions of the school mascot, lions, are proudly displayed in the front office and down every hallway at Greenway. Motivational posters, paintings, and encouraging vinyl letterings are also evident as to serve as a constant reminder to persevere, have courage, and be kind. The vision or goal of Greenway is explicitly displayed at the front foyer upon entering the campus. The focus is on student growth, development and closing of the achievement gap, develop student competencies (e.g., effective communicator, competent problem-solver, self-directed learner, responsive citizen, and quality producer), and providing a safe learning environment.

The founders of the campus serve as the hero and heroine of Greenway. The stories of their educational career and contributions to student learning are passed down year after year, as well as portrayed along an entire wall in the front foyer of the entrance with artifacts, plaques, portrait, and community photos. The rituals and ceremonies at Greenway are symbolic acts that connect people together and give structure and meaning to the daily routines on the campus. Examples of these include staff members greeting every child who walks into the building and greeting each other down the hallway, daily morning announcements where students’ and teachers’ successes are celebrated while also getting everyone pumped for the school day, and also the end of the day announcements where the principal thanks the staff members and students each day for a wonderful school day and anticipation of a wonderful next school day.

These rituals anchor the staff members and students to the campus; when these are not performed, the day seems to “be off”. Ceremonies bring people together for socialization, stabilization, assurance, and to serve as a message of value. The beginning of the school year celebration to welcome staff and families, the end of the grading period pep rally, the end of the school year sendoff ceremony, and the fifth-grade end of the year

graduation ceremony are some of the important ceremonies that are practiced at Greenway. No matter the differences or varying levels of functioning of students and/or staff members, rituals and ceremonies bring cohesion and collaboration at Greenway.

All of the above-mentioned artifacts and espoused values help to build over time the culture and the people of Greenway. However, there are many non-negotiables or basic assumptions that also impact the culture at Greenway. These include mandatory administrative team meetings every Monday that spans the majority of the instructional day and rendering the absence of administrative support during this time. The administrative team at Greenway includes the principal, assistant principals, instructional specialist, school nurse, school librarian, school counselor, and the educational diagnostician. The secretaries to the principal and assistant principals are occasionally present for parts of the meetings; however, they serve as interim staff members who address campus-based issues that may arise while the administrators are in these meetings. Here lies an issue already, are these secretaries fully knowledgeable of all the federal and district regulations both instructional and noninstructional to be able to make decisions on behalf of administrative members during their absence? During these administrative meetings, the members discuss critical issues from the previous week and issues that may arise during the present week. These may include instructional, district-related, grade-level specific, special education, state testing, and other areas. However, these meetings also serve as a “time to breathe” for the team - there’s a lot of venting, gossiping, and time-wasting discussions intertwined between topics of discussions.

The members of the leadership team were purposefully selected by the principal of Greenway due to the knowledge and skills from each member that would help to serve the campus in achieving the campus goal, but also due to the individual’s personality to the team. The leadership team strives to be cohesive and grounded through vulnerability-trust, is able to master conflict productively, achieve commitment through conflict, embrace accountability, and focus on results. In the broad scheme, every organization needs a strong leadership team who makes the intentional decision and willingly accepts the work and sacrifices. However, many areas are impacted by these routine meetings. The absence and unavailability of not only the school leaders, but also the supporting campus members (e.g., school nurse, librarian, educational diagnostician) who address health and medically related issues, technology-related crises, and special education related matters, respectively. Teachers and staff members have become accustomed to when the administrative meetings are held and what developed over time was a sense of freedom and unaccountability for the staff members, which impact student performance. Staff members tend to arrive at work on Mondays in jeans and a t-shirt knowing that there’s a slim chance of running into the principal or assistant principals that day as they will be tied up in the administrative meetings. The teachers also know

there won't be a principal or assistant principal who will randomly pop into their classroom to do a walk-through or observation, and there won't be the "walking on eggshells" feeling.

Regarding the organizational problem, data that is needed to determine the effectiveness of implemented strategies tend to be pushed aside for another time, deviation is made from the campus-approved lesson plans, activities that may have been planned for the school day tend to replace with "sneaky recess", free draw, or independent choice of activity. Some staff members will leave the school premise for an unscheduled break and have another staff member cover for them. The unstructured functioning of these classrooms and the deviation from routines of the typical instructional day tend to impact struggling students, which then increases the occurrences and frequency of behavioral issues and concerns.

Greenway also has mandatory teacher planning time every Tuesdays and Thursdays during the grade-level lunch and recess block. These two days, teachers are instructed to not be available for any activities other than planning, which includes their unavailability for special education related meetings. Teachers in today's educational world wear many hats and juggle many tasks. The "all in" goal established by the principal asks that all staff members go above and beyond for the student and the campus. Her high expectations for teacher performance and student outcomes without the necessary support provoked an increase in anxiety, stress, and resorting health issues in staff members. As the workload increased, the unnecessary clerical tasks were not unloaded off the teacher's plates so more and more work was piling up creating burnout, disgruntled and low teacher morale. When teachers request help, administrators are quick to request more supporting data even when teachers provide a stack of student work samples and informal and formal assessment data that appears to just be glanced over and shuffled back to the teacher. This "passing back the baton" behavior causes teachers to not ask for help and just address the issue on their own, which may not be the appropriate intervention for the student.

The lack of clarification to the expectations or directive, coupled by the absence of administrative presence, caused teachers at Greenway to form their own interpretation of such tasks and then those interpretations, right or wrong, are then passed down to their partner teachers and other grade-level teachers. Bad habits are formed in this manner. Implementation is then affected which impacts student success. This pattern clearly creates obstacles when addressing the organizational problem as discussed in the following text.

On the surface, everyone at Greenway plays a very convincing part in pretending to strive for student success for all students; however, there are many teachers and staff members who theatrically play the right parts and recite the right phrases to get

by the school year without the appropriate classroom results and consequently student growth. Teacher morale is affected greatly by the persistent underlying issues of (a) increased demands of teacher workload, (b) large classroom size, (c) increased curricular tasks that must be incorporated in their daily lesson plans, (d) lack of understanding of proper implementation of intervention, (e) lack of differentiated instruction, (f) lack of support and guidance of administrators due to campus-related concerns that take precedence, and (g) lack of knowledge and understanding of the difference between learning difficulties versus learning disabilities. Increased expectations without the appropriate coaching, guiding, or support leads to nothing more than "all motion and no meat".

All the right artifacts are visible to portray what the values and goals of Greenway are, but implementation is a different story. The espoused values are nothing more than sweet icing on an empty cardboard cake; flashy décor throughout the building to mask and distract the attention away from the mechanical and functional issues at Greenway. Teachers become overloaded with the non-negotiables at Greenway, which then affects the quality and quantity of instruction, intervention, and monitoring of the students' progress. Teachers are constantly trying to play catchup in a feat that appears to be endless. Therefore, implementing RtI interventions are short-lived and rarely student-specific. Interventions should match the need of the student. Student progress should also be checked often in order to determine the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the interventions to the instruction or goal. Lack of communication and collaboration with key individuals of the referral process creates an epidemic of recommendation for restrictive assessment without the appropriate data being considered and voids the process of member-checking to ensure that alternate interventions could not have been utilized to alleviate the student's struggle in the least restrictive approach. Non-negotiable teacher planning time and administrative unavailability during three of the five school days brews a sense of pressure and stress for teachers to work with the students who grasp concepts quickly and passing on the ones who struggle for others to "deal with" because these educators simply do not have the time and support needed to address all the instructional and non-instructional tasks expected of them from the campus, the district, and the state.

Underlying resistance does emerge from grade-level teachers and staff members who reject the essential assumptions of the present paradigm at Greenway simply because these educators realize the organizational system is not working in terms of student learning growth due to the culture that drives the structure. When an organization is viewed in terms of schemas, the paradigms constructed by the members of the organization are then understood to have sculpted and sifted the manner in which they view their experiences. Therefore, in order for an organizational

change to occur at Greenway, a paradigm shift is needed. However, as the principal is in charge of the hiring-firing process, most teachers are fearful of challenging the administrative team or go against their directives and jeopardizing their career. Those who challenge the authoritative figure will soon find themselves on the end of the table with a decision to make - get in check or get on out. The principal only hires and maintains employees who align themselves with the vision and goal of Greenway, which is highly regulated by her personal vision and goal for her campus. This makes the task to change the paradigm difficult.

Organizations are a constant reciprocally molding circular process of structure and culture. Shaped by organizational contingencies (e.g., bureaucracy), the organizational realities influence the communication and actions that members experience, their beliefs, and their values. These organizational contingencies mold the people, their alignment, and thus the organizational paradigm they create to explain the organizational contingencies. Structure impacts culture and culture impacts structure. Cause and effect – change in the setting are correlated to the actions the people take. If there is no action, then there is no change and the organizational problem continues to not only exist but will also spread to affect other aspects of the organization. From a cultural perspective, Greenway is a human structure established in values. To solve and change the organizational problem at Greenway, confident educators must work together to influence the mindset of themselves and others to espouse new collections of assumptions that bring forth innovative approaches that build new sets of organizational contingencies, expectancies, and responsibilities. Culture builds people as much as people build the culture.

### Trust Frame

*"If a trust school means an opportunity to work with partners while having greater control of them to meet youngsters' needs, we're all for it." - John Baumber*

Trust matters. Trust is one of the fundamentals to every successful and healthy relationship whether the relationship is a personal or professional one. Trust is one of the most critical building blocks which allow individuals to perform and exist in an emotionally safe and tolerable environment. Trust acts as the glue that holds people together. Without trust, our world, whether big or small, inflates into an environment of dishonesty, insecurity, resentment, loss of respect, and unproductivity.

Through a frame of trust, the organizational problem of appropriate referral and placement of special education services will be discussed. A careful examination is needed to understand its impact to the referral-to-placement process, the implementation process of Response to Intervention (RtI), instructional approaches and teacher efficacy, administrative support, and overall knowledge and understanding of learning

difficulties versus learning disabilities at Greenway Elementary School. Non-trust is incapacitating, forcing leaders to constantly manage conflicts and allocating their time on reassuring, persuading, and micromanaging staff members.

Similarly existing in various types of organizations, relationships at Greenway center around different dynamics - staff member to student, staff member to staff member, staff member to the administrator, and staff member to parent. Collectively, trust within each of these types of relationships is crucial to the success and improvement of the school. When trust is established, individuals are more willing to share their ideas and thoughts. They are then more likely to take on more risks and accommodate or modify their approach to assist in building student growth. No matter how successful or impactful a leader is in making transformational change in the school, a leader without trust will always be spending more time and energy on minute details and management instead of actions that contribute to the overall improvement of the campus and the students. Trust is foundational to teamwork, and teamwork is what makes organizations successful.

The Four C's of Trust [1] will be utilized to discuss the trust factor at Greenway Elementary School - Care, Competence, Character, and Communication – and how they impact the organizational problem previously identified. Care can be explained in terms of the leader honoring the individual's strengths, intentions, and efforts with respect, compassion, and empathy. Competency is a functional skill that reflects a leader's ability to produce results, acquire needed resources, demonstrate mastery of the topic or skill, and presents himself or herself with confidence. Character refers to an individual's integrity, honesty, follow-through, and consistency in their actions. Lastly, communication is a broad area that encompasses an individual's ability to be open and vulnerable to their actions and attitudes, willingness to share information, ability to have face-to-face conversations, and the alignment of both their verbal and non-verbal communicative methods.

The leadership at Greenway is not one of a capricious or brutal one; however, at the same time, the leadership is often seen as trying to cut a pie into equal slices for all without any standardized measuring tool. Whatever way you slice the pie, there will always be those individual or individuals who demand a bigger slice justifying their stance with their own biased self-interest. As the leadership team at Greenway attempt to balance the equity and equality of learning for all students, they jeopardize many areas that impact trust. The intentions of the school leaders at Greenway are often overshadowed and dismissed by the actions they choose to take or not take for any given issue that may arise. The lack of specialization at the elementary level of this school forces these leaders (i.e., principal and assistant principals) to wear too many hats and juggle too many tasks in any given day. This mere issue brews difficulties with the leaders being able to provide

teachers, parents, and students the time needed to authentically demonstrate respect, compassion, and empathy. The leaders are seen as fake and uncaring as they unintentionally brush issues aside for when they do have time to handle the issue or when the leaders interrupt the individual who came to ask for help, to begin with. The lack of care from these leaders diminishes the level of trust and widens the gap of administrative support that should be provided by these leaders.

The lack of competence in many areas of instruction is apparent at Greenway. When students struggle academically or behaviorally in the classroom, an educator's first action should be to determine how to address the issue through the use of research-based interventions. Academically, these would be practices through Response to Intervention (RtI), a multi-tiered integrated approach to providing interventions. By providing high-quality instruction and interventions that align with the student's need, educators can explicitly and purposefully target the specific area. Frequent monitoring of the student's progress will also allow educators to make decisions about any changes that may be needed in the instructional goal. Effective implementation of RtI helps educators to make accurate decisions about the effectiveness of instruction and intervention, identify academic and/or behavioral issues at the early stages, prevent the over-identification and under-identification of students with disabilities, and assist with making recommendations for the individual education programming for students with disabilities. This integrated approach to service delivery includes both general and special education. Effective implementation of RtI necessitates planning, collaboration, leadership, and consistent implementation by staff members across the educational system. The goal and intention of RtI advise local education agencies (e.g., principals, assistant principals) to foster a well-integrated system of instruction and intervention that combines general, remedial, and special education services through research-based practices, common measures, and explicit decision-making procedures driven by student outcomes.

However, at Greenway, interventions are neither student-specific nor is it implemented with fidelity. However, a note must be made that even the assistant superintendent overseeing the special education programming of Harmony Independent School District in which Greenway resides, has point blankly stated on many occasions at district level meetings that "we just don't do RtI here at Harmony". This furthers the lack of support given to the leaders of Greenway, which impact the competency and support the leaders provide to their staff members – this issue stems at the top of the hierarchical pyramid.

The interventions provided to the student often times lack consideration and are implemented for only a short duration, which neither provides the data intended to determine its effectiveness for improvement. Interventions provided to struggling students

by their teacher would typically be small group instruction, oral administration, supplemental aids, or extra time as if every child would respond to such generic accommodations. After a week or two, should the student not progress then teachers move forward to recommend special education assessment and bypassing the three-tiered model of school support system. Leaders at Greenway typically follow this progression rather than observe and make further recommendations to try. Their stance – time is a commodity, let us give the student help the quickest way possible. Intentions are in the right place; however, special education is not and cannot be deemed a sensible and justified reaction to the predicament of school failure.

With only a couple weeks of data, where interventions may not have even been provided reliably and consistently, educators cannot confidently say that the learning rate and the level of performance of the student can be determined as they vary greatly from one student to the next. Learning rate requires data to be collected and examined over a period of time to determine whether there was student growth in academic or behavioral areas as compared to previous levels of performance and peer growth rate. Level of performance refers to the student's relative position based on a criterion or normed referenced measures. The educators at Greenway understand what they have to teach; however, are provided with little to no guidance when faced with teaching students who do not fit within the proverbial box of learning perfection.

Another issue stems from the leader's lack of follow-through and consistency in their decision-making. Through the hierarchical chain of command at Greenway, issues must first be presented to the assistant principals prior to reaching the principal. However, the answer to a problem often depends on which assistant principal the staff member approaches. Each assistant principal has very distinctive personalities, although both are equally kind in their own way, and their approach to a problem is heavily driven by their own biases. Staff members who have been at Greenway for a longer duration have learned which of the two assistant principals to approach to get the answer that benefits them the most, while newcomers only approach the assistant principal assigned to their grade-level as they were instructed to and end up being chastised by the other assistant principal, principal, or fellow teaching peers for doing it "the wrong way" or told "that's not how we do things around here." The response staff members receive also depends on whether they are in the "preferred group" or not. The preferred group is staff members that the administrative team has come to like more either through the extra efforts these staff members put in, their ability to say "yes" and do as they are asked, and their willingness to not fight back to directives. These "preferred" individuals tend to have more leniency in the rules and expectations, and their excuses are often accepted.



All these examples lead to unfairness among teaching peers and break away the level of trust they have for their leaders. When trust breaks down due to the leader's character, staff members are less likely to put forth the extra mile for their job no matter how much they love teaching. They become less innovative because they feel more vulnerable and alone and these staff members will give less latitude to the leadership as they are suspicious and cautious of their leader's intentions. This impacts people's ability to unite around action plans that may lead to more progress in transformational changes in the school. When a leader's sense of consistency and reliability is in question, staff members end up exerting unneeded time and energy agonizing over whether or not their decisions and actions will be supported and also mentally preparing themselves in the case that they are not.

Lastly, communication at Greenway is a bit constrained; mostly on a need-to-know basis. Decisions are made top-down and often times the justification of why the decision to do something or not do something is held back. The principal at Greenway is selectively-open about her decisions and feels that the more information that is provided to all staff members, the more conflict and confusion will arise. Therefore, only the necessary individuals (e.g., administrative team) have the details of the decisions made. The principal is not unwilling to share the information; she does not mind sharing the ins and outs of her decision and all it takes is for the concerned individual to come to her office to ask but her door may be closed, or she may be off campus. She prefers and values face-to-face conversations, but her availability is an obstacle to that feat.

Greenway Elementary School has all the right components to a great school and the leadership is ready, willing, and able to serve the students. The issue is putting all those right components together in the right fashion and moving in a cohesive, well-oiled manner for the sake of the students and their families. Trust must be built and maintained at all levels (e.g., staff member, staff member to the administrator, and staff member to parent) through respect, openness, and honesty. We build trust by honoring individual strengths and differences, by following through with our words, and by letting our actions uphold our integrity, commitment, and vision. The leaders at Greenway should perform a self-assessment of the level of trust that is present in their leadership. In an organization centered around humanistic tendencies and approaches, it is difficult to appease to all parties involved; however, how are the leaders at Greenway balancing out the scale of trust through their daily transactions regarding trust deposits and trust withdrawals?

### Power and Politics Frame

The organizational problem regarding special education was previously examined under the structural, cultural, and trust frame. The current state of the special education system in the United States positions itself in a bit of a contradictory standpoint.

On one hand, special education services, as a fundamental component of the total educational system, was developed and provided to serve only those children who meet the federal eligibility criteria of having both a disability under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and an educational need for specially designed instruction. On the other hand, as a fundamental component of the total educational system and not a separate sect, special education also stands to serve as a means of increasing the competence of the collective educational system to fulfill the educational needs of all children. In that sense, special education programs are, and are not, oppositional understandings on labeling and distinctive teachings within the moralistic-based standpoint and the needs-based standpoint of the habitual predicaments that obscure the inclusive practices of children with special needs and their educators.

The notion of power and politics are often clouded by a sense of resistance and negativity in any given situation; however, they play an essential role in the success of organizations. Education is a business of people, so lives are involved and at risk when politics and power become unbalanced or exists to serve the agenda of single constituents rather than the collective good. Neither power nor politics can be eradicated; however, when controlled properly, they can guide positive outcomes. Through the power and political frame, any failures or struggles of the organization are not directly held liable to specific individuals, but rather through the collective decision-making of the people within the system. As with any organizational group, Greenway Elementary School has an essential responsibility to carry out the purpose of educating and shaping the learning of their students. Now within the school, the staff members (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, librarians) serve as the means of achieving that goal in the manner in which the leaders envision.

Given the underlying organizational problem at Greenway, discussions regarding the exertion of power and the political propositions are necessary to understanding the antecedents that impact the issue, as well as deliberate possible recommendations to target the situation. First, certain political assumptions must be stated: (a) Greenway is comprised of unique individuals who bring differences to the organization; (b) the members of Greenway have varying interests, perspectives, and biases; (c) there are funding and resource allocations that must be distributed based on prioritized content need; (d) the allotment of resources combined with individual differences will feed the power bucket as in many cases of supply and demand; and (e) similarly in economics, bargaining and negotiating are integral proceedings in order to achieve set goals and make decisions.

The principal at Greenway recognizes the importance of the individual, as well as grade-level, needs. Yet, she is confined and limited to the resources (e.g., materials, funding) that are allocated to the campus by the district. The principal demonstrates her

political stance and power via teamwork by seeking input from the members of the school when the opportunity is appropriate. Serving as principal for over six years at Greenway, she has learned to balance out being a manager (e.g., make final decisions, monitoring action plans, holding staff members accountable) and being the fuel that ignites others to step up and empower others. Both are very important qualities to have as a leader but of course, no one leader can please all of their members a hundred percent of the time – some view her methods as wishy-washy as she is no-funny-business one moment and loving-and-encouraging the next. In reality, she uses her authoritative power to appropriately influence and control the demands of running Greenway.

Decisions toward the educational goal at Greenway, therefore, is a constantly evolving process of negotiation and bargaining from staff members and administration influenced by individual power play. Through coercive and legitimate powers, staff members comply with their leaders due to the authoritative position, but also due to the fear of losing their position at Greenway and/or being reprimanded, which affects their opportunity for having their name placed in a drawing at the end of the year to win a monetary bonus. Reward power (e.g., earning jeans passes, extra planning period, food and drinks incentives, classroom coverage) is often used at Greenway by administrators when delegating tasks to staff members with the promise of something in return. The issue with this type of power is that the power becomes weakened or satiated over time as the value of the reward is no longer perceived as enough. Bigger and better incentives (e.g., end of the year drawing for monetary bonus check) are then necessitated in order for the power to be returned back into the hands of the leaders. The principal at Greenway should try to build on her referent and expert powers; she is not often seen as the ultimate role model on the campus due to her unavailability and “do as I say and not as I do” mentality.

Work demands continually increase with little alleviation through administrative support or additional training. Tasks and expectations are often voiced to staff members; however, administrative team members often have more leeway to their contributions other than being physically present. The leaders may have a good appreciation of their campus but tend to not be admired or liked to the full extent due to their absence and excuses of having “more important things to do”. With extent power, the principal often directs questions and concerns to other members on the campus or in the district. Her knowledge-base is often limited due to lack of continued professional development or prior skills-attainment in a particular area (e.g., special education services and support). Her lack of ability in specific areas impact her power hold, which is then transferred into the hands of the individual who does have the knowledge and skillset for the particular topic (e.g., educational diagnostician).

Networking and coalition building are the keys to this political battlefield. Trusting too deeply on logic without the reliance on

relationships only generates a more constricted organization. Powerful leaders learn the strengths and weaknesses of their team members and utilize this knowledge to build relationships that can influence the cause. Pinpointing the weak players, or those who are constantly at odds with directives and resist change can provide leaders with a targeted assessment of why and to what degree. And lastly, using communication skills and other techniques to work closely with opposing members allow leaders to form a relationship with them to increase their motivation, buy-in, and/or their respect.

Conflict exists in any setting; the key is to work to manage them as they arise before they grow into a detrimental situation. Schools are a microcosm of humanity, and with that in mind, conflict affects both adults and children in the school setting. Effective leaders use basic prevention skills (e.g., setting ground rules, practice active listening, identifying issues, think and act), to manage conflicts. Handling the problems as a separate entity rather than attacking the people involved will diminish the feelings of “making it a personal issue” and fosters a level of respect for the leader from the individuals. Using the power and politics in this instance would not be beneficial for the leader; target the issue through the lens of equality rather than an authoritative position.

Power can be evil, but power can also be liberating – it all lays in how a leader uses his or her power. In addressing the specific organizational problem through the power and political lens, inappropriate referrals and placement of students into special education are impacted by the global assumptions that (a) mild disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities) are diagnostic, (b) diagnoses of disabilities are unbiased, (c) special education is an instructionally logical system, and (d) student progress is seen as logical and methodological in the sense that progress can be observed over the span of time to be used for straightforward development of the programming.

Instructionally, school leaders begin their administrative career with a gap in their special education knowledge and training. Principal preparation programs vary across the state of Texas and there is little to no requirement for a course to specifically address the all-encompassing dealings of special education. The principal’s power of information and expertise surrounding special education makes it difficult for the leader to lead and support his or her teachers in providing appropriate and just interventions, referrals, and instructional practices. Students are wrongfully identified with a disability far too often, sometimes due to the power and political play on the educational diagnostician, or assessment specialist, from the school principal. The plea of “the student needs help and special education can provide that” because the student’s needs cannot be met in the general education setting is all too familiar.

Furthermore, special education is a politically balanced structure that provides support to distinctive students, where the effectiveness of such interventions is questionable and is followed

by stigma. Through an organizational lens, the whole institutional system of special education only serves as a representation for the community that the transformation of education has transpired. But through the cultural lens, special education serves to misrepresent the irregularity in school failure in an attempt to maintain the accountability standards.

Correspondingly, the use of power and politics should be used to promote collaboration and problem-solving among educators, as well as guardians. Through past practices and the bureaucratic nature of the profession, educators worked more in isolation. While isolated special classrooms and resource rooms were also developed as mere attempts to appear as if the school

was complying with the law but served more like programs that were developed to minimize the disruptions of the general functions of the school organization. Power should be used in this instance to minimize the effects of a disability label and maximize the implementation of specially designed instruction and the promotion of inclusive practices.

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