

Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Special Education Leadership Through Targeted Professional Development

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Abstract

This study evaluated the effectiveness of Virginia State University's Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA), a targeted professional development program designed to address critical gaps in special education leadership competencies. Using a pre-post assessment design, 67 school leaders participated in this two-day academy focused on enhancing leadership skills in inclusive education. Results showed statistically significant improvements across all 13 measured competencies ($p < .01$), with effect sizes (Cohen's d) ranging from 0.34 to 0.91. The largest effects were observed in building reliable assessments ($d = 0.91$), engaging students through high-leverage instructional practices ($d = 0.90$), and integrating core subjects into special education curriculum ($d = 0.89$). Participants reported highest post-program confidence in promoting a positive image of special education (4.59/5), communicating with families (4.52/5), and communicating with diverse groups (4.50/5). The SELA program demonstrates how targeted professional development can effectively bridge the preparation gap for special education leaders, particularly in areas identified as critical by the literature. These findings contribute to growing evidence supporting specialized training for school leaders responsible for inclusive education. Future research should focus on longitudinal impacts and translation of improved competencies into organizational changes to ensure high-quality education for all students with disabilities.

Keywords: Special education leadership, Administrator preparation, School leadership development

1. Introduction

Special education leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring equitable and effective education for students with disabilities. According to the (U.S.) National Center for Educational Statistics, the number of students ages 3–21 served under *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) in the United States

increased from 6.4 million in school year 2012–13 to 7.5 million in school year 2022–23 which equates to an increase from 13 to 15 percent of students [14]. As the number of students receiving special education services continue to increase and the complexity of special education programs continues to grow, school leaders face increasing challenges in managing these programs effectively [5]. The unique demands of special education leadership, including navigating complex legal requirements, coordinating diverse support services, and promoting inclusive practices, necessitate a specialized skill set that often extends beyond general school administration competencies [9].

Recognizing this need, there has been a growing emphasis on specialized training and professional development programs for special education leaders. These initiatives aim to enhance leaders' competencies in areas such as developing effective programs for students with disabilities, promoting inclusive school cultures, and understanding and implementing special education policies [3]. This literature review examines the key competencies required for effective special education leadership, explores various models of professional development in this field, and evaluates the impact of these training programs on leaders' perceived abilities to manage special education programs effectively.

2. Special Education Leadership Competencies

Research has identified several key competencies essential for effective special education leadership. These include developing and implementing programs for students with disabilities, promoting inclusive school cultures, effective communication with diverse stakeholders, and understanding special education policies [3, 9].

Boscardin [6] emphasizes the importance of leaders' ability to develop effective programs of study for students with disabilities. This competency involves not

only understanding diverse learning needs but also integrating evidence-based practices into individualized education programs (IEPs). Similarly, Billingsley and Banks [4] highlight the critical role of school leaders in promoting inclusive cultures, which involves fostering positive attitudes towards inclusion among staff and students.

Effective communication with diverse groups, including families, teachers, and community stakeholders, is another crucial competency identified in the literature [10]. This skill is particularly important given the collaborative nature of special education decision-making processes.

Understanding and explaining special education policy to colleagues is a competency that has gained increased attention in recent years [17]. As special education law and policy continue to evolve, leaders must stay informed and be able to guide their staff in implementing compliant practices.

At the national level, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), in collaboration with the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), has developed Advanced Preparation Standards for Special Education Administration [8]. These standards outline seven key areas of competency for special education leaders:

1. Assessment
2. Curricular Content Knowledge
3. Programs, Services, and Outcomes
4. Research and Inquiry
5. Leadership and Policy
6. Professional and Ethical Practice
7. Collaboration

These national standards provide a framework for developing and evaluating special education leadership preparation programs across the United States. They emphasize the importance of evidence-based practices, ethical leadership, and collaborative problem-solving in special education administration [7].

3. Professional Development for Special Education Leaders

Given the specialized nature of special education leadership, principal preparation and targeted professional development programs have emerged as a critical tool for enhancing leaders' competencies. Bai and Martin [1] argue that traditional school leadership

preparation programs often fail to adequately address the unique challenges of special education, due to limited space in the traditional curriculum, and highlighting the need for specialized training.

Various models of professional development for special education leaders exist in the literature. University-based programs, such as those described by Bellamy and Iwaszuk [2], offer comprehensive approaches that combine theoretical knowledge with practical applications. These programs often lead to advanced degrees or specialized certificates in special education leadership.

District-led initiatives, including mentorship programs and professional learning communities, have also shown promise in enhancing leadership skills [15]. These approaches often benefit from their ability to address context-specific challenges and provide ongoing support.

The effectiveness of professional development programs is typically evaluated through changes in leaders' perceived competencies and, less frequently, through impacts on student outcomes. Veale et al. [19] found that participants in a year-long special education leadership academy reported significant improvements in their ability to manage special education programs effectively.

Assessing the impact of leadership training programs presents several challenges. Many studies rely on self-reported measures of competency, which, while valuable, may not always correlate directly with changes in practice or student outcomes [11]. Pre- and post-assessment methodologies are commonly used to measure changes in perceived competencies. For example, a study by Johnson and James [13] used a Likert-scale survey to assess changes in participants' confidence across various special education leadership domains following a professional development program

4. Virginia State University's Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA)

Virginia State University (VSU) launched its Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA) in the summer of 2024. While current state licensure regulations require aspiring administrators to receive some minimal training in special education, this initiative was in response to survey results of a 2020 Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) study that demonstrated a critical need in the Commonwealth of Virginia's education system, indicating a significant gap in school-level administrators' knowledge and skills to support special education teachers effectively [12]. JLARC directed the State Board of Education to review and update

regulations governing administrator preparation programs to require graduates demonstrate comprehension of key aspects of special education.

As a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), VSU was uniquely positioned to address the dual challenges of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs and the underrepresentation of African American leaders in special education administration. This positioning aligned with research by Billingsley and Banks [4] highlighting the importance of diverse leadership in addressing equity gaps in special education.

4.1. Program Development and Structure

The SELA program was a two-day summer academy aimed at current and future educational leaders involved in the administration and monitoring of special education programs. The primary goal was to enhance the capabilities of building and/or division leaders in creating more inclusive schools. The program targeted school leaders from across Virginia, with particular emphasis on regions facing significant challenges in special education service delivery, an approach supported by Bai and Martin's [1] research demonstrating the importance of regionally-focused administrator training programs that address local inclusive education needs.

Funding for this innovative professional development initiative was secured through a competitive grant process, reflecting a commitment to addressing the special education leadership gaps identified in the JLARC study [12]. This specialized training aligns with Boscardin's [6] assertion that special education administration requires distinct competencies beyond general educational leadership preparation.

The academy's curriculum was based on the Administrator of Special Education Professional Leadership Standards, combining theoretical knowledge with practical applications. These standards, developed by the Council for Exceptional Children [8], provided a research-validated framework emphasizing key domains of special education leadership including assessment, curricular content knowledge, programs and services, research and inquiry, leadership and policy, professional and ethical practice, and collaboration—areas identified by Boscardin et al. [7] as essential for effective special education leadership.

4.2. Curriculum and Instructional Approaches

The SELA program emphasized legal and regulatory requirements, instructional best practices (including

high-leverage instructional practices), and effective discipline strategies for inclusive practices. The legal component focused on regulatory compliance and procedural safeguards—areas identified by Zirkel [20] as particularly challenging for building-level administrators. The instructional practices component drew heavily on research regarding evidence-based, high-leverage practices that maximize outcomes for students with disabilities across diverse educational settings, addressing what Billingsley et al. [5] characterized as a critical need for leadership preparation in inclusive instructional approaches.

The academy featured nationally recognized experts and facilitators who delivered sessions aligned with professional standards for special education leadership competencies. These facilitators included practitioners with extensive experience in special education administration, legal experts specializing in special education law, and scholars engaged in cutting-edge research on inclusive leadership practices. This diverse group of facilitators ensured participants received both theoretical foundations and practical insights into effective special education leadership, an approach endorsed by DeMatthews et al. [9] in their study of successful principals' recommendations for leadership preparation. Participants engaged in activities, case studies, and presentations that provided research-based strategies and opportunities to apply learnings through interactive scenarios, with a focus on underrepresented special education teachers, administrators, and directors.

The interactive learning approach incorporated principles of professional development effectiveness identified by Guskey [11], particularly the importance of active learning and application opportunities. Case studies were drawn from real-world scenarios encountered in Virginia schools, ensuring relevance to participants' professional contexts. This approach aligned with Frick et al.'s [10] findings that effective special education leadership development requires authentic ethical problem-solving opportunities within relevant contexts.

To enhance the practical application of learning, participants developed personalized action plans for implementing evidence-based inclusive practices within their specific school settings. These plans incorporated strategies for building teacher capacity, enhancing family engagement, and creating inclusive learning environments that benefit all students, including those with disabilities. This component directly addressed Theoharis and Causton's [18] research on the importance of school leaders developing concrete implementation plans for inclusive reform. Additionally, the program's focus on building local capacity aligns with Bettini et al.'s [3] findings on the

crucial role of special education administrators in cultivating effective teacher communities.

The SELA program also acknowledged the growing role of career-changers in special education leadership, as highlighted by Veale et al. [19], by creating networking opportunities between experienced administrators and those new to special education leadership. This collaborative approach addressed the findings of Bellamy and Iwaszuk [2], whose case study research demonstrated the effectiveness of structured professional development and mentoring for new local special education administrators.

5. Methods

The evaluation of the Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA) employed a pre-post assessment design to measure changes in participants' perceived abilities across various aspects of special education leadership. A survey instrument was developed using a 5-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "Not at All" (1) to "A Great Deal" (5). This survey assessed 13 key competencies related to special education leadership, including developing effective programs for students with disabilities, promoting inclusive cultures, and understanding special education policies. The pre-assessment was administered to 67 school leaders prior to their participation in the SELA program, establishing a baseline measure of their perceived abilities.

Following the completion of the SELA program, participants were then given the same survey as a post-assessment to measure changes in their perceived competencies. To analyze the impact of the program, paired samples t-tests were conducted comparing pre- and post-assessment scores across all 13 competency areas. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* to quantify the magnitude of changes in each competency. This methodological approach allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the program's effectiveness in enhancing participants' confidence and perceived abilities in special education leadership, while also identifying areas of greatest improvement and those that may require additional attention in future iterations of the program.

5.1. Population and Sample

The target population for the Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA) consisted of current and aspiring special education leaders from across Virginia, with a particular focus on Regions 1 and 8, which encompasses 26 school divisions. The study sample was composed of school leaders who participated in the program and completed the pre- and post-assessment

surveys. In this dataset, 69 completed the pre-test and 54 completed the post-test. These participants represented a diverse group of educational professionals, including current special education administrators, principals, assistant principals, and other school administrators with a focus on special education. The sample also included program managers and coordinators responsible for overseeing specialized services.

In line with Virginia State University's mission as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), efforts were made to recruit participants from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in special education leadership. This sampling approach aimed to address the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education and the underrepresentation of African American special education teachers and directors. While the sample size of 67 participants allowed for meaningful statistical analyses, it's important to note that this represents a subset of the broader population of special education leaders in Virginia, and results should be interpreted with this context in mind.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Position Category	Count	%
School-Level Administration	33	56.9%
• Building Principals	9	15.5%
• Assistant/Associate Principals	23	39.6%
• Deans/Administrative Support	1	1.7%
Special Education Leadership	12	20.7%
• SPED Directors/ Supervisors	2	3.4%
• SPED Coordinators/ Department Chairs	5	8.6%
• SPED Lead Teachers	3	5.2%
• SPED Compliance Officers	2	3.4%
Instructional Support	9	15.5%
• Instructional Coordinators/ Specialists	5	8.6%
• Special Education Teachers	2	3.4%
• Program Coordinators	2	3.4%
Other/Combined Roles	4	6.9%

5.2. Analysis of Data

The evaluation of the Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA) program involved an analysis of data collected from pre- and post-assessments. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS version 29.0. The first step in our analysis involved calculating descriptive statistics. We computed mean scores and

standard deviations for each of the 13 competency areas in both the pre- and post-assessments. This initial overview provided us with a clear picture of how participants perceived their abilities before and after participating in the SELA program. To protect participant anonymity, we designed our assessment process to avoid collecting identifying information that would allow for direct matching of pre- and post-test responses. This decision prioritized participants' privacy but necessitated using independent samples t-tests rather than paired samples analyses. Consequently, we conducted independent samples t-tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences between pre-assessment (n=69) and post-assessment (n=54) scores for each of the 13 competency areas.

We set a stringent significance level of $p < .01$ for all statistical tests, ensuring a high degree of confidence in our results. This analysis revealed a statistically significant improvement across most items measured on the assessments, suggesting a positive impact of the SELA program. Additionally, we assessed the reliability of the results by calculating Cronbach's alpha on the post-test results. This value ranges from 0 to 1, with a result closer to 1 indicating higher reliability. For this dataset, $\alpha = .935$.

To better understand the magnitude of these improvements, we also calculated effect size using Cohen's d. This step was crucial in quantifying the practical significance of the changes we observed. Because of the small sample size, Cohen's d was calculated to show the magnitude of the difference. Cohen's (1988) guidelines delineate a small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$), and large ($d = 0.8$) effect based on his suggested benchmarks. This analysis helped us identify which aspects of special education leadership showed the greatest improvement and which areas might benefit from additional focus in future iterations of the program.

6. Results

To assess the impact of the SELA program on participants' perceived abilities in special education leadership, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted comparing pre- and post-assessment scores across 13 key areas. The results (see Table 1) showed statistically significant improvements in most measured abilities ($p < .01$ for 11 of the 13 comparisons). The effect sizes from the pre- to post assessment on each item ranged from .651 to .912, indicating a medium to large effect for every item. The largest effect sizes were on the following items: Build reliable assessments into a special education program ($d = .912$); Engage special education students through high-leverage instructional

approaches ($d = .903$); and Integrate core subjects into the special education curriculum ($d = .895$).

Table 1. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Assessment Results

Confidence in ability to...	Mean Pre-test (n=69)	Mean Post-test (n=54)	t value
1. Develop effective programs*	3.49	4.35	-5.56
2. Promote an inclusive culture for underserved populations in special education**	4.14	4.48	-2.51
3. Effectively communicate with diverse groups	4.28	4.50	-1.90
4. Explain special education policy to colleagues*	3.58	4.22	-4.24
5. Promote ethical data usage among special education leaders*	3.58	4.22	-4.78
6. Promote a positive image of the special education program*	3.97	4.59	-3.84
7. Provide accommodations/modifications to meet accessibility requirements	4.14	4.35	-1.41
8. Communicate with families to support appropriate student decision making**	4.09	4.52	-3.19
9. Engage special education students through high-leverage instructional approaches*	3.52	4.17	-3.93
10. Integrate core subjects into the special education curriculum**	3.71	4.15	-2.69
11. Build reliable assessments into a special education program*	3.26	3.89	-3.79
12. Effectively utilize data and research to develop special education best practices*	3.64	4.22	-4.08
13. Develop and carry out a culture of inclusion*	3.90	4.48	-4.29

* $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$

The most substantial improvement was observed in participants' ability to develop effective programs of study for students with disabilities ($d = 0.73$), while the smallest, yet still meaningful, improvement was in providing accommodations/modifications ($d = 0.34$). These findings suggest that the SELA program was effective in enhancing participants' confidence and perceived competencies across various aspects of special education leadership, with particularly strong impacts on program development and policy understanding.

To provide a comprehensive view of overall program impact, we calculated total competency scores for participants in both pre-assessment ($n=69$) and post-assessment ($n=54$) groups (see Figure 1). This composite score represents the sum of ratings across all 13 leadership competencies, offering a holistic measure of participants' perceived abilities in special education leadership.

Analyses revealed a statistically significant difference between total pre-assessment ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.642$) and post-assessment scores ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.521$), $t(121) = -4.83$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this difference was large (Cohen's $d = 0.877$), indicating a substantial overall improvement in participants' perceived special education leadership competencies following completion of the SELA program.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this comprehensive improvement suggests that the SELA program was effective not only in enhancing specific competencies (as detailed in Table 1) but also in strengthening participants' overall confidence and perceived ability across the full spectrum of special education leadership skills. The large effect size for the composite score ($d = 0.877$) suggests that the program's cumulative impact may be greater than the sum of its individual components.

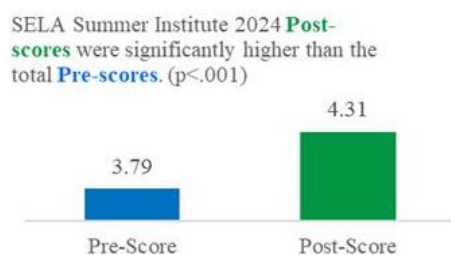


Figure 1. Comparison of Total Pre and Post-Scores

7. Discussion

As demonstrated by the significant improvements across 12 of the 13 measured competencies, the results of the SELA program evaluation align closely with the

professional standards and theoretical frameworks that guide special education leadership development. This comprehensive impact addresses a key need identified by researchers for developing a broad skill set in special education leaders (Boscardin et al., 2016; 5). These results also reflect the multiple dimensions of special education leadership as conceptualized in the CEC Advanced Preparation Standards [8]. In particular, the substantial gains in developing effective programs for students with disabilities ($d = 0.73$) directly corresponds to the Programs, Services, and Outcomes standard, which emphasizes leaders' ability to design and implement evidence-based practices that address diverse learning needs. Additionally, the notable gains in promoting inclusive cultures and explaining special education policy reflect critical priorities in recent literature [3], [15], [17]. This improvement in participants' ability to explain special education policy to colleagues aligns with the Leadership and Policy standard, highlighting the critical role that special education leaders play in interpreting complex policies within their organizations. As Zirkel [20] notes, the increasing complexity of special education law necessitates leaders who can effectively translate legal requirements into practical guidance for staff.

Our findings regarding communication competencies, particularly the significant improvement in communicating with families ($p < .01$), support Frick et al.'s [10] assertion that effective communication with diverse stakeholders is of utmost importance to ethical special education leadership. This improvement suggests that the SELA program effectively addressed what Billingsley and Banks [4] identify as a core component of inclusive leadership, which is the ability to engage and collaborate with multiple populations.

The program also had a substantial impact on promoting inclusive cultures ($d = 0.65$), which reflects the theoretical shift described by Theoharis and Causton [18], who emphasize that special education leadership has evolved from a compliance-focused model to one centered on creating inclusive educational environments. This finding suggests that the SELA successfully includes modern theories about special education leadership that focus on fairness and including everyone.

While all areas showed improvement, more modest gains in competencies such as providing accommodations ($d = 0.34$) may reflect trends where frequently practiced skills show smaller improvements compared to novel competencies [16]. The area with the lowest post-program score, building reliable assessments, aligns with findings indicating this remains a challenging area for many special education leaders [10].

Overall, the SELA program's results contribute to the growing evidence supporting targeted professional development for special education leaders. The program's success in improving a wide range of competencies supports assertions for comprehensive, standards-aligned leadership preparation [2]. However, as Guskey [11] notes, future research should examine the long-term impact on leadership practices and student outcomes to provide a more complete picture of the program's effectiveness and its potential to drive systemic improvements in special education leadership.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

The SELA program evaluation highlights several avenues for future research that could enhance our understanding of special education leadership development. A key priority should be longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of the program. These studies could track participants over several years, examining the sustainability of skills, their application in practice, and effects on student outcomes. Comparing SELA participants with a control group would provide more robust evidence of the program's effectiveness.

Additionally, further investigation into competencies that showed less improvement, such as building reliable assessments, is warranted. Mixed-methods studies could explore the challenges in developing these skills and identify more effective interventions. Finally, research examining how improvements in leadership competencies translate into organizational changes in special education programs would provide valuable insights into the broader impact of leadership development initiatives.

Future research should also explore the differential impact of professional development on various leadership roles within the special education ecosystem. With SELA participants ranging from building principals to specialized teachers, analyzing how position-specific responsibilities influence both training needs and application of competencies could inform more tailored approaches to special education leadership development [9]. The demographic diversity represented in the participant pool—particularly the strong representation of assistant principals (36.2%)—suggests an opportunity to examine how middle management positions specifically benefit from targeted professional development and potentially serve as change agents within their institutions.

Expanding research into how HBCU-led professional development initiatives like SELA address the documented underrepresentation of African American leaders in special education administration

[4] represents a critical area for investigation. Studies examining how such programs contribute to diversifying leadership pipelines could inform broader efforts to ensure special education leadership reflects the populations served. This aligns with recent calls in the literature for increased attention to equity considerations in special education leadership preparation [5], [10].

Research is also needed to compare the effectiveness of different leadership models—such as transformational and distributed leadership—in promoting inclusive practices and improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Studies should examine how these models operate in various school contexts and the mechanisms by which they empower teachers and staff to implement inclusive education [8].

With the rise of technology, particularly AI in education, research should examine the effectiveness of technology-integrated professional development for special education leaders. This includes studying the impact of virtual academies, online coaching, and digital resource platforms on leadership competencies and program implementation [11].

As federal and state policies evolve, research should monitor the effects of changes in administrator preparation program requirements and licensure standards on the quality and effectiveness of special education leadership. Comparative studies across states or districts implementing different policy reforms would provide valuable insights into best practices for leadership preparation. These research directions align with current trends and pressing needs in the field, as identified in recent peer-reviewed literature, and will contribute to a more robust, equitable, and effective special education leadership landscape [17].

Finally, given the high effect sizes observed in building reliable assessments ($d = 0.91$) despite this area showing the lowest post-program confidence scores, further inquiry is needed into this apparent paradox. Investigating why assessment-related competencies simultaneously show substantial growth yet remain challenging could yield valuable insights into the developmental progression of special education leadership skills. Such research could potentially identify advanced competency thresholds that require more sustained or intensive professional development approaches than a two-day academy format can provide [11], [16].

9. Conclusion

The evaluation of the Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA) provides compelling evidence of its effectiveness in enhancing the competencies of special

education leaders. These pilot program results indicated that the SELA program successfully addressed a wide spectrum of critical skills needed for effective special education leadership. Particularly noteworthy were the substantial gains in developing effective programs of study for students with disabilities ($d = 0.73$) and promoting inclusive cultures, aligning well with current priorities in the field of special education.

The success of the SELA program also highlights the critical role that Historically Black Colleges and Universities can play in addressing long standing inequities in special education leadership. By specifically focusing on developing leaders who can serve diverse student populations, particularly in regions with significant representation of historically marginalized students, SELA represents more than just professional development—it constitutes a strategic intervention in the educational ecosystem. The program's emphasis on both technical competencies and inclusive practices demonstrates how targeted initiatives can simultaneously address the dual challenges of compliance requirements and the moral imperative to create truly inclusive educational environments. As school systems nationwide continue to struggle with special education teacher shortages, disproportionate representation in disability classifications, and achievement gaps for students with disabilities, programs like SELA offer a promising approach to building leadership capacity where it is most needed [4], [5], [9].

Looking forward, the promising results of the SELA program open up several avenues for future research and development. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of the program on leadership practices and student outcomes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness. Additionally, further investigation into the competencies that showed less dramatic improvement could yield insights for enhancing these specific areas of the program. As the field of special education continues to evolve, the SELA program demonstrates a model for comprehensive leadership development that can adapt to meet emerging challenges. By continuing to refine and study such initiatives, we can work towards ensuring that all students with disabilities have access to high-quality education led by well-prepared and competent leaders.

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