

Factors Related to the Retention of Special Educators in Rural Areas: What Administrators Need to Know

BY ANN B. BERRY

The shortage of special education teachers has become a primary problem facing the field of special education in general and is a persistent challenge for administrators in rural areas, including many regions of New Hampshire (Boe & Bobbitt, 1997; Theobald, 1991). Attrition of special education teachers is reported to be as high as 25 percent in rural schools, which comprise 40 percent of the nation's districts (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, in press; Rural School and Community Trust, 2007). This is notably higher than the 11.4 percent nationwide shortage of qualified special educators (Boe, 2006). The impact of such a high attrition rate is costly; administrators (i.e., building principals and special education directors) have to spend time recruiting and hiring new teachers, and the continuity of services to students with disabilities disrupted. The disruption of curriculum implementation can have a direct impact on student achievement (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2002).

To address teacher shortages and positively influence the integrity of the education provided to students with disabilities, increasing teachers' satisfaction and job commitment is important. The following discussion outlines several factors related to special education teacher satisfaction and commitment and poses related implications for administrators interested in retaining special educators in rural areas.

Special Education Teacher Attrition

The special education literature summarizes several factors that contribute to the attrition of special educators, including age, experience, and certification. Research indicates younger, inexperienced, or insufficiently certified teachers have the highest rate of attrition (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singer, 1992; Stempien & Loeb, 2002). Teachers who are not originally from the rural area where they are teaching also appear to be at a high risk for attrition due to their lack of social ties to the area (Bornfield, Hall, Hall, & Hoover, 1997). However, such teacher characteristics are difficult to change.

Working conditions in the school, on the other hand, have also been shown to have an influence on teacher commitment and are more alterable aspects of the work environment that are more directly within an administrator's control (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). For example, professional isolation and role confusion are two factors that appear to contribute to special educators' job dissatisfaction and attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Miller et al., 1999). Infrequent opportunities to exchange ideas with other educators and teaching without clearly defined roles and responsibilities when working in general education classrooms contribute to teachers reporting higher levels of dissatisfac-

tion. In rural areas, special educators may be among a few special educators in their schools or districts, increasing their sense of professional isolation and decreasing their opportunities for support (Ludlow, Conner, & Schechter, 2005).

Factors Related to Retention in Rural Schools

To increase teacher satisfaction and commitment, administrators can play a critical leadership role in fostering positive working conditions within the school environment. These factors include (a) assisting teachers in developing supportive relationships with administrators, other special education teachers, and general education teachers; (b) helping teachers develop a broader network of support with related service providers and other special educators in their area or region; and (c) planning in-service training opportunities and making resources and funds available for additional teacher training.

Research conducted by Westling and Whitten (1996) with 156 rural special educators found that work-related support from administrators, such as recognition and assistance grappling with the challenges of their position, was associated with rural teachers' higher levels of commitment. Similarly, Menlove, Ganes, and Salzberg (Annual Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education, 2003), when investigating 814 rural special educators in Utah, confirmed that positive working relationships between special educators, administrators, and general educators contributed to the commitment teachers expressed. In addition, relationships with other special educators were central to providing the information and support that assisted these committed teachers in handling the work-related stress of their positions (Annual Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education, 2003).

Nagle and her colleagues (2006), investigating 13 schools in rural areas with high teacher retention rates, documented how these schools capitalized on the positive qualities found in small, rural school communities. Researchers found that the close-knit nature of the rural school communities promoted cooperation and communication between educators and administrators, which was essential to a supportive working environment. Weekly planning time involving teams of general education and special education teachers, related service providers, and administrators promoted an in-depth understanding of the students with disabilities in their schools and a pride in collaboratively meeting their needs.

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Recent research in rural school districts nationwide (Berry, in press) corroborated the findings noted above by conducting survey research with 203 special educators. Teachers identified sources of support available to them and ranked the helpfulness of that support. Multiple liner regression analyses investigated the relationship between helpful sources of support and teachers' reported levels of satisfaction and commitment. Teachers' responses underscored the importance of supportive relationships within the school community

when considering such issues as teacher retention. The study found that the availability of a wide network of support was correlated with teacher commitment. This was particularly true if the special educators felt administrators and general education teachers in the school understood their roles and responsibilities and shared in the responsibility of educating students with disabilities on their caseload. Teacher satisfaction and perceived levels of efficacy, both variables related to commitment, were also correlated with helpful support from administrators, general education teachers, related service providers, and other special educators. Similarly, research conducted by Gehrke and McCoy (2006) confirmed that teachers who intended to remain in special education reported a diverse and broader network of professional support.

An interesting finding from the Berry (in press) study was that some teachers in rural areas reported a limited availability of typical support sources. While these teachers recognized other special educators in the building as the most helpful source of professional support, this source of support was not always readily available (22 percent of the teachers did not have other special educators in the building). Researchers hypothesized that since support from other special education teachers may not always be present in geographically isolated rural districts, relationships with others in their school (e.g., administrators, general education teachers, and related service providers) were important to these teachers' levels of satisfaction and commitment. General education teachers were an important source of available support (98 percent available), as both special and general educators share in the responsibility of providing educational services to students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Frequent and collaborative exchanges have the potential to result in positive supportive relationships. Related service providers (e.g., speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists) were another source of available support (98 percent available) that offer special education teachers information unique to the service providers' areas of

expertise, such as students' strengths and weaknesses, targeted areas of intervention, and home school communication. Other sources of support that frequently were identified as unavailable but desired by rural special education teachers in the study were grade-level team meetings, special education team meetings, and online contacts with other special educators.

Participation in relevant professional development can increase teachers' feelings of competency and effectiveness, thus increasing their commitment to the field (Gersten et al., 2001). Berry et al. (in press) identified several areas of professional development that special education teachers in rural areas felt were outside their general training but necessary to meet their current teaching responsibilities. As inadequate certification is related to teacher attrition, administrators and local educational leaders will want to be mindful of these areas when planning for local and regional professional development in order to support their teachers with the responsibilities of their positions. These areas included further training in collaboration skills, inclusive practices, and training to increase the special educators' understanding of curriculum content. Teachers also named several low-incidence disabilities as topics desired for further training, including autism, cognitive impairment, hearing and vision impairment, emotional and behavior disorders, and severe disabilities.

Implications

Supportive school communities. The findings of the special education retention research noted above suggest that rural administrators may have a unique opportunity and can foster qualities found in many rural communities in their own school communities: close-knit, supportive, collaborative. Administrators will want to create a supportive school culture by promoting relationships within the school community and providing opportunities to exchange personal and professional support. These opportunities might include school gatherings, co-teaching relationships between special and general education teachers, grade-level and special education team meetings, and mentoring relationships. Through flexible scheduling or release time, administrators can help special and general education teachers, related service providers, and administrators dedicate the necessary time to problem solve student-related issues and support each other. Such communication can provide integration and consistency to educational approaches, particularly when para-

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professionals, parents, and others who come in contact with the student with disabilities are part of the discussion.

In addition, administrators may be able to assist special education teachers in creating supportive relationships with others beyond their rural community. By making financial resources available, as well as creating strategic partnerships with local and regional agencies, administrators can facilitate teacher participation in district-wide or regional workshops, seminars, and

conferences. Such regional training opportunities not only provide teachers with the necessary skills to meet the needs of the students in their caseload, but also can be a conduit for establishing working relationships with other special educators and related service providers in their region and beyond. These supportive relationships can be maintained through online contact and become a continued source of professional support (Knapczyk, Chapman, Rodes, & Chung, 2001). Such relationships have the potential to support teachers who desire further opportunities to problem solve student-related issues, exchange information on resources and service providers, and brainstorm solutions to common issues faced by special educators in rural areas.

Professional development. As the roles and responsibilities of special educators increasingly move to inclusive settings, and because teachers in some rural settings have limited access to their special education colleagues, administrators will want to make training and coaching in inclusive practices and co-teaching available to the teachers in their school, thus assisting them in further defining respective teaching roles and responsibilities in the general education classroom. Such training has the potential to create a meaningful sense of a shared responsibility in the delivery of services to students with disabilities (Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery, 2010).

Conclusion

School administrators and rural policy makers have an important role to play in the creation of work environments that foster supportive relationships for their special educators. This review of the literature suggests that assisting special educators in building helpful and diverse networks of support within their school communities is positively associated with teachers who report higher levels of satisfaction and commitment. Furthermore, if other special education colleagues are not available in their school communities, administrators can support their teachers in build-

ing relationships with other special educators in their districts, regions, and/or states. Attention to such factors may increase teacher satisfaction and commitment and may ultimately be associated with enhanced quality of special education in rural areas.

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