

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION: HOW MANY ARE LEAVING? WHERE ARE THEY GOING?

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A statewide survey was conducted to determine the number of special education teachers leaving positions in Utah between February 1, 1998 and January 31, 1999. Reasons for leaving were also identified in order to infer possible retention strategies. Findings indicated that 238 special education teachers (9.3%) left their jobs during the one-year period. It was estimated that approximately 9% of this number might have been retained with corrective action. Main reasons for the preventable attrition included transfers to general education and resignations for personal reasons. In-depth research is needed to identify more specific factors underlying special education teacher attrition.

The shortage of certified special education teachers has been noted for many years (e.g., Billingsley, 1993; Boe, Cook, Bobbit, & Terhanian, 1998; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982). Billingsley (1993) attributed the shortages to several factors, including (a) increasing special education enrollments, (b) the decline in the number of special education teachers graduating from certification programs, and (c) attrition. Boe (as cited in Billingsley, 1993) believed that teacher *attrition* accounts for most of the shortage problem and advocated developing teacher retention strategies to allay its negative effects.

The available pool of special education teachers is largely an outcome of two variables, the number being produced, and the extent to which they remain in teaching positions over time (i.e., retention/attrition). Research suggests that yearly attrition may be the largest contributing factor to the shortage of special education teachers, though additional research is needed to explain why teachers are leaving special education classrooms (Brownell & Smith, 1992).

Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) and Westling and Whitten (1996) suggested that it may be possible to reduce special education teacher attrition by taking corrective action at state and district levels. Schnorr (1995) acknowledged the importance of state investigations, stating that factors influencing teacher decisions are often specific to the context in which attrition occurs. Billingsley (1993) agreed, pointing out that inquiries at the lo-

cal level are more likely to ensure that retention strategies are consistent with actual needs. If these speculations are true, it would seem important to conduct statewide investigations to determine specific attrition factors within each geographic region.

The primary purpose of this investigation is to determine the extent of teacher attrition in Utah and to identify the factors underlying teacher decisions to leave their immediate assignments. A secondary objective is to infer possible remedies which, in turn, could be research tested. In attempting to address the problem of teacher attrition in Utah, two research questions were raised: (1) How many special education teachers are leaving Utah schools each year? and (2) Where are they going? Subsumed under these categories were additional queries: (a) What is the comparative distribution of leavers across disability categories and age levels? (b) Does the number of years of professional experience impact attrition rates? and (c) Is location (i.e., urban vs. rural) a significant factor?

Notwithstanding the salience of all these critical issues, the most important questions underlying this investigation were "What was the proportion of special education teachers who left for reasons specific to their jobs?" and "How many of them might potentially have been retained with corrective or special support procedures by their local school districts?" We will refer to the latter as "preventable attrition." Although previous research has examined special education attrition and noted that it is a significant problem, these studies

have not differentiated between attrition that can or ought to be prevented and that which is nonpreventable or would be undesirable to prevent. Thus, prior results may be misleading in terms of the *numbers* of teachers who might be expected to respond favorably to some type of reparative action. For example, the career plans of retiring teachers and those seeking opportunities for promotion may be more fixed than teachers leaving because they dislike working conditions.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Two hundred thirty-eight teachers employed in 39 Utah school districts participated in the study. Ninety-two percent of the total numbers of teachers surveyed were women. Participants had been employed in education for an average of 9 years, with nearly one fourth having taught 2 years or less.

Participants were identified by district special education directors who filled out a survey for all special education teachers leaving a position in Utah between February 1, 1998 and January 31, 1999. (The Utah State Office of Education verified survey information provided by the districts and supplied missing participant information.)

Since most of Utah's population (numbering fewer than 2 million people) is concentrated in the area adjacent to the Great Salt Lake, it is not surprising that roughly 73% of Utah's public school-age youth attend schools in eight districts within this geographic region (Alpine, Davis, Granite, Jordan, Ogden, Provo, Weber, and Salt Lake Districts). Approximately 27% of Utah students enrolled in public education attend schools in 31 districts located throughout the state in smaller, more rural areas.

SURVEY

The survey asked for the name of the school district in which the teacher was employed, the type of certification needed for the position vacated, the school to which the person was last assigned, the age level of the students, and a description of the service delivery pattern (e.g., resource,

self-contained). The number of years in the current teaching assignment, the number of years employed in education, and the reasons for leaving were likewise solicited. The certifying institution, the state in which certification was obtained, the type of certification program, and whether or not the respondent was teaching on a letter of authorization were additional requests. The survey also asked for the number of special education teachers employed in each district within the early childhood, mild/moderate and severe disability categories. The entire survey was one page in length and consisted of six short-answer questions and seven questions that required a check mark or a one-word response. See Figure 1 for the survey form.

Several steps were taken to verify the accuracy of the data. For example, close to two-thirds (63%) of the information was checked against records in the state office regarding the number and types of teachers who left their jobs. The principal investigator checked the data input twice. In addition, a second data analyst independently checked the data input and frequencies.

PROCEDURES

In the fall of 1998, a state committee consisting of individuals from the Utah State Office of Education, local school districts, and university teacher preparation programs was created to discuss critical personnel shortages to serve students with disabilities in Utah's public schools. The current research project was initiated to provide the committee with information they needed to better assess teacher shortages statewide.

The study consisted of two phases. The first phase examined how many teachers within specific certification areas (i.e., early childhood, mild/moderate, and severe) left their positions in Utah public schools between February 1, 1998 and January 31, 1999, and how they were distributed across districts of different sizes and locations. The second phase examined where these teachers went and why they left.

The researchers constructed the survey in collaboration with the Utah State Office of Education and district special education directors. Copies of the survey were distributed to special educa-

Figure 1: Attrition Survey Form

School District _____ Date _____

Name of person completing survey _____

*Utah State Office of Education
Services for At Risk Students
Special Education Attrition Survey*

Please complete a survey form for each person filling a position in one of these areas who left your district in the last 12 months.

Name _____

Please check the type of certification needed for position vacated

(check one or more):

Early Childhood _____ Mild /Moderate _____ Severe _____ Elementary _____
Secondary _____ Speech and Language Pathologist _____ School Psychologist _____

This person was teaching on a Letter of Authorization: Yes _____ No _____

School to which this person was last assigned:

Please check all areas that apply to the last assignment (at least one item per line):

Full-Time _____ Part-Time _____ Itinerant _____
Preschool _____ Elementary _____ Middle/Junior High _____ High School _____
Resource _____ Severe _____ Self-Contained _____ Special School _____
Other _____

Number of years in the above assignment: _____

Total number of years in education (if known): _____

University issuing certification: USU _____ U of U _____ WSU _____

BYU _____ SUU _____ UVSC _____

Other (please indicate institution, including out of state) _____

Type of program: University _____ Distance Ed _____ Alternative Prep _____

Other _____ NA _____

Why did this person leave?

Please check destination: Retired _____ Moved out of State _____

Changed District _____

Transferred to Regular Ed _____ Leave of Absence _____ Left Education _____

Promotion _____ Other _____

Total number of special education teachers employed in your district:

Early Childhood _____ Mild/Moderate _____ Severe _____

Other _____

Total number of SLPs : _____ **Total number of school psychologists:** _____

tion directors at a regularly scheduled meeting held at the state office mid-February, 1999. Directors were to mail their completed surveys to the project staff within one month.

Follow-up. The first follow-up to obtain missing data was a reminder letter mailed in March 1999 to special education directors who had not yet returned their surveys. (At the same time, a thank you letter was mailed to those who had.) After that, follow-up phone calls were made over the summer months to districts that had not yet responded. In early July, a detailed letter was sent to the Utah State Office of Education requesting missing participant data. When the follow-up procedures were completed, 100% of the districts had responded to the survey.

Missing data. Percentages of missing data were noted in the following categories: Age level of students – 2%; Structure of work assignment – 2%; Number of years employed in this position – 2%; Teaching on letter of authorization – 4%; Number of years employed in education – 8%; State in which certification was obtained – 8%; Certifying institution – 18%; Type of certification program – 36%. (In other areas, all of the data were obtained.)

RESULTS

In this section, we examine the types of reasons special education teachers left their positions. As we examine these reasons, we will try to estimate the number of teachers who might have been induced to stay with increased district support.

Table 1 summarizes the reasons why special education teachers left their positions during the year of our study. It may be seen that 28 teachers (11.8%) retired or died, 9 teachers (3.8%) were terminated, 13 teachers (5.5%) took temporary leave and 64 teachers (27%) moved. Of the sixty-four who moved, 35 moved for unknown reasons and 29 left because they got married and/or because their spouse took a position in a different location.

Forty-six teachers transferred to other positions in their own school districts. Of those, 15

went to other special programs (e.g., Title I, ESL) or their district office. Of special interest are the 31 who transferred to general education teaching positions. Perhaps some of those teachers might have been retained through extra efforts by their local education agencies.

The largest group of special education teachers in the study (32.8%) consisted of those who resigned from their jobs. Most of them resigned for reasons that were probably unpreventable by district actions. For example, 16 opted to stay home with a new baby, 9 wanted to work closer to home, 16 left education entirely, and 3 left for medical reasons. A sizable number, 16, left to take positions in another school district. While their school districts were probably chagrined to lose them, from a statewide vantage point, these teachers do not represent attrition since they are still working as special education teachers in the state (albeit for a different school district).

In summary, of the 2,222 special education teachers in Utah, 238 left their positions in one year - about 9.3% of the total. One important question is how many of these leavers might have been retained through special efforts by their school districts (e.g., changes in working conditions, more support, more compensation). Although it is impossible to know that with any certainty, the asterisks in Table 1 denote the three subcategories which contain individuals who might have been amenable to district inducements to stay. They include special education teachers who transferred to general education teaching positions, those who resigned for personal reasons, and the one individual who resigned because of stress. Our speculative opinion (which is certainly arguable) is that perhaps, optimistically, 15 of those who transferred to general education, 6 of those who resigned for personal or unknown reasons, and the 1 who resigned due to stress might have been retainable by their local school districts. That is a total of 22 teachers. Thus, arguably, 22 or 9% of those who left their positions might have been retained.

Table 1
Utah Special Education Attrition Study: Reasons for Leaving

Reasons	Number of teachers	Total for category	Percentage
Retired/deceased		28	11.8
Terminated		9	3.8
Leave of absence		13	5.5
Moved		64	26.9
Unknown reason	35		14.7
Marriage or spousal job	29		12.2
Transferred		46	19.3
To ESL, Title 1, at-risk, or gifted program	7		2.9
To school counseling position	2		.8
To district office position	4		1.7
Forced transfer within district	2		.8
* To general education position	31		13.0
Resigned		78	32.8
	16		
To stay home with new baby, family			6.7
To be closer to home, family	9		3.8
Left education entirely	16		6.7
* Unknown or personal reasons	11		4.6
Medical or health reasons	3		1.3
To take position in another school district	16		6.7
To take position in higher education, private school, or state office	4		1.7
Wanted a position in general education but district would not reassign	1		.4
* Job was stressful or discouraging	1		.4
Disinterested in special education	1		.4
Total		238	100.0

DISCUSSION

If historical trends are an indicator of future events, special education teacher shortages will continue to plague school districts throughout the nation as well as in Utah. Nationally, about 9% of all special education teaching positions are filled by unqualified, noncertified personnel each year and another 1% are not filled at all (Office of Special Education Programs, 1998). Billingsley (1993) re-

ported a Wisconsin study of special education teacher attrition in which about 14% of special education teachers left their teaching positions (Bogenschild, Lauritzen, & Metzke, 1988) and cited similar attrition rates in a Virginia study (Cross, 1987). These attrition percentages parallel the 9.3% special education teacher attrition rate found in this Utah study.

Utah teachers who left their special education teaching positions did so for a variety of rea-

sons. The predominant reasons for attrition included teachers moving to another geographic location, transferring to either another school district or another teaching or administrative position, and resigning for family or personal reasons. National and other state studies documented additional factors that contributed to special education teacher attrition, including teacher certification status, age, years of experience, perceived stress, and perceived school climate (Boe, et al., 1997; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999).

Some types of attrition are not preventable (e.g., death, retirement, moving with a spouse to another geographic location, accepting an advancement or administrative position, and family or personal factors). In most or all of these cases, nothing could have been done to prevent the special education teachers from leaving. Moreover, in many cases, teachers moving to another geographic region remain teachers in these new locales.

Preventable reasons for attrition include transferring to a teaching position in general education. Current findings indicated that about 13% of those surveyed transferred for this reason. It is estimated that about 6% of this sample might have been retained with corrective action. Studies comparing general educator attrition with that of special educators have consistently revealed higher attrition rates for special educators than teachers in general education (Billingsley, 1993). Thus, an examination of the data comparing predictors of attrition among general and special educators might be useful in generating testable hypotheses aimed at retaining special education personnel (Billingsley, 1993).

Despite the higher attrition rates of special educators, results of a recent comparative study suggested that reasons for leaving among the two groups are fairly similar. Moreover, these findings corroborated previous research (Billingsley, 1993; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987) pinpointing salary, age, years of teaching experience and family factors as significant predictors of teacher turnover for both special education and general education teachers.

Other preventable reasons for attrition include transferring to another school or district, lack of teacher certification status, perceived stress, and perceived school climate. Special education teachers in this category who are most at risk for leaving are those who are poorly trained or not certified to teach special education (Boe et al., 1997; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Lack of administrative support is also linked to special education teacher attrition (Brownell & Smith, 1992).

Retention strategies to improve administrative support include assessing teacher attitudes and levels of job satisfaction, constructing interventions based on teacher-identified needs, and holding administrator/teacher conferences to strengthen communication and build advocacy (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Westling and Whitten likewise recommended that administrators inform general educators about special education teacher roles, encourage collaboration between general and special educators, and give teachers sufficient time to complete paperwork. Administrators also need to give teachers a voice in making decisions (Miller et al. 1999).

Hiring fully certified, well-trained special education teachers tends to reduce the rate of special education teacher attrition. However, unfortunately, the shortage of special education teachers makes that impossible some of the time. While it is also true that teachers who are older, more experienced, and higher on the salary schedule are more likely to stay in their positions (Boe et al., 1997), these teachers may be unavailable for hire.

Collaborative efforts between school districts and universities have been effective in increasing teacher support. These programs offer increased training and supervision to first-year special education teachers by providing district mentors who receive input and support from university faculty (Cheney, Krajewski, & Combs, 1992; Lindsey & Strawderman, 1995; McCabe, et al., 1993). Teachers who learn to work collaboratively and who develop strong coping skills at the pre-service and in-service levels may be better able to handle job stress and difficult school climates and be less likely to leave their teaching positions (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999).

Clearly, there are strategies that can be used to address the preventable reasons for special education teacher attrition. In the future, these interventions need to be studied to determine their effectiveness and to measure their effects on special education teacher attrition over time. There is also a need for additional research to more specifically identify the reasons why special education teachers leave. In-depth interviews with teachers who left their positions might provide additional insights into what could have been done to prevent their leaving. For example, in this study we found a large number of teachers who moved for unknown reasons. It would be useful to know why they moved and if they moved for reasons relating to employment conditions (e.g., lack of effective communication/support systems, teacher dissatisfaction).

Future research might also do well to compare attrition rates and reasons for leaving of special education and general education teachers subsequent to the inclusion movement – particularly since the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Studies assessing the impact of recent changes (e.g., increased accountability for general educators; more complex, sometimes conflicting roles for special educators) on teacher turnover could potentially provide information leading to the increased retention of educators in both fields as they continue to serve larger numbers of students identified for special education services (Kozleski, Mainzer, & Deschler, 2000).

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