

Retaining Qualified Special Education Teachers

Understanding Why Teachers Leave and What School Districts Can Do About It

Nationwide, the chronic shortage of qualified special education teachers threatens the quality of education that students with disabilities receive. Attrition—both transferring to other teaching assignments and exiting the field altogether—contributes to the shortage. Consider these facts:

- Special education, mathematics, and science are the fields that experience the highest turnover rates. Special education teachers are more likely to depart than other teachers.
- Estimates for special education attrition are as high as 13 percent annually, with about half of those teachers moving to other positions and half exiting the field altogether.
- Many special education teachers transfer to general education positions.
- General education teachers who hold both general and special education certification are not likely to transfer to special education.

Have you considered why special education teachers leave? Efforts to reduce attrition at the district level must start with an understanding of the factors that contribute to these teachers' decisions to exit the profession or transfer to other positions. A wide range of factors influence

attrition, including personal and work environment characteristics. Read on to gain insights from the research.

Have You Considered Teacher Characteristics and Personal Factors?

Teacher characteristics and personal factors play a large role in special education teachers' decisions to leave. Examples of characteristics that have been linked to attrition include:

- **Age.** Younger teachers leave or express an intent to leave at rates nearly twice that of veteran teachers.
- **Experience.** Teachers are more likely to leave during the first five years of teaching.

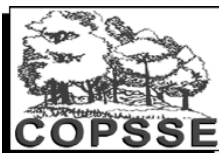
Personal factors also account for special educators' decisions to leave their positions. Examples of personal factors that have been linked to attrition include:

- Flexibility (e.g., individuals with no debts or family responsibilities).
- Lifestyle cycle stages (e.g., child rearing and retirement).
- Personal needs and preferences (e.g., desire to leave urban districts, better career alternatives, etc.).

IN THIS WATCH

Why do special education teachers leave the profession? What school districts should consider when bolstering retention practices.

FEBRUARY 2004
PB-13



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Have You Considered Teacher Qualifications?

Teacher qualifications also may explain why some teachers leave. Research has found higher levels of attrition associated with the following teacher factors:

- Lack of teacher certification.
- Higher scores on standardized tests (e.g., SAT) or standardized teacher exams.

Have You Considered Work Environment Factors?

Work environment factors can lead to high levels of stress and

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Historically, recruitment strategies have not eliminated all shortages. Consider this: In 1999, although more than 50,000 special education teachers were newly hired, more than 12,000 positions remained open.

low levels of job satisfaction—both factors associated with attrition. Excessive and prolonged work environment problems also can seriously weaken teachers' resolve to stay in teaching by reducing the likelihood of positive intrinsic rewards.

Special education work environment factors that contribute to attrition include:

- **Low salaries.** In some cases, teachers can earn higher salaries in other districts.
- **Poor work climate.** There is often inadequate support from administrators, isolation from colleagues, and few opportunities for professional development.
- **Job design problems.** Job design factors (e.g., lack of time, paperwork burdens, etc.) have been identified as major

factors in special education teachers' decisions to leave. In recent years, factors associated with inclusive practices (e.g., coordinating with classroom teachers, complexity of scheduling students) also have contributed to teachers' decision to leave.

Unlike their general education counterparts, special education teachers typically do not cite student characteristics (e.g., lack of progress) as a reason for leaving.

Have You Considered District Level Retention Strategies?

Central office administrators play a critical role in retaining special educators by ensuring that district-wide policies support their work. Issues such as teacher role overload, unreasonable job requirements, and lack of support systems must be addressed to ensure that special education teachers can be effective in their work.

The strategies that follow—especially when used in combination with one another—should be considered in the effort to support retention:

- **Provide higher salaries.** Recruitment practices such as cash bonuses and placement on a higher salary step may help to attract teachers, although such practices may not necessarily retain them.
- **Enhance teacher professionalism.** Provide opportunities for special education teachers to grow and advance professionally.
- **Develop beginning teacher programs.** Provide support in areas where beginning special educators report challenges, including: managing paper-

work, making instructional and assessment accommodations, developing and monitoring individualized educational programs, and collaborating with other personnel and families.

- **Offer mentor programs that help teachers become more effective.** Special education teachers should be paired with special education teacher mentors, even if they teach in different schools.
- **Provide paperwork support.** Some districts assign coordinators or related services personnel to share paperwork burdens.

For More Information

Information reported in this brief was based on the COPSSE research synthesis, *Special Education Teacher Retention and Attrition: A Critical Analysis of the Literature*, by Bonnie S. Billingsley. This document can be found on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.



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About COPSSE

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The policy briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.

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