



Texas A&M University - Kingsville

**Factors Related to Special Education Teacher Retention in High Poverty
Rural South Texas Schools: A Survey of Experienced Special Education
Teachers in High Poverty Rural South Texas Schools**

Final Report

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Special educators are in the greatest need in public schools today (AAEE, 2003). Twenty-eight percent of all special educators were undecided about remaining in the field or intended to stay only until something else comes along (Westat, 2002a). Keeping experienced special education teachers in the classroom is critical to the success of the children. In an effort to increase the retention of experienced special education teachers, this project was undertaken to investigate the retention factors in the following manner:

- Conduct an investigation of experienced special education teachers to determine the factors contributing to their longevity in the classroom in rural South Texas high poverty schools.
- Utilizing the current research from the literature review, investigate retention factors for experienced special education teachers.
- From the investigation, determine what factors, if any, are similar to current research contributing to experienced special education teacher retention in rural South Texas high poverty schools.

Special educators, the professionals in greatest need in public schools today (AAEE, 2003), work daily to deliver on the promises of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), yet the complexities of the profession and the environments in which they often work conspire to convince them to leave. Across states of the Northeast, twenty-eight percent of all special educators were undecided about remaining in the field or intended to stay only until something else comes along (Westat, 2002a). Understanding why teachers leave is the first step in getting them to stay. Yet, because of the complexity of the issues embedded in retaining high quality teachers, administrators find addressing these essential issues to be a daunting task.

Background and Literature Review

Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, and Weber (1998) noted that six percent of all special education teachers leave the teaching field each year with an additional five percent of special education teachers transferring to another field of teaching. Murnane, Singer, and Willett (1989) noted that “research suggests that teachers make marked gains in effectiveness during their first years in the classroom. Consequently, reducing the frequency with which children are taught by a successive stream of novice teachers may be one step toward improving educational quality” (p. 343).

The individual achievement of children is highly dependent on the effectiveness of the teacher, and the impact of ineffective or unqualified teachers across years dooms children to instructional losses that cannot be regained (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). University of Tennessee researchers W. L. Sanders and J. C. Rivers found that within grade levels, the most dominant factor affecting students' achievement was the effect of the teacher, and that this effect increased over time. Likewise, Darling-Hammond (2000) reported that inexperienced teachers, i.e., those with less than three years of experience, were typically less effective than more senior teachers, though these effects tended to level off after five years.

The climate within a school building and the workforce conditions it encompasses act as either a support or a deterrent for teacher retention (Westat, 2002b; Ingersoll, 2001; Gersten, et.al., 2001; Johnson, et.al., 2001). Workforce conditions that encourage the capabilities and emphasize the worth of individuals contribute to retention (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2001, p. 40). These schools are also more successful in retaining all teachers than school buildings that leave these functions up to the happenstance of building alliances or impromptu conversations in the teachers' lounge. In particular, special education teachers are more likely to not only stay in

their teaching position when building-level conditions are supportive of them professionally, but they are more likely to stay in teaching, per se (Billingsley, 2003).

Target Population

The target population of the study included experienced rural South Texas special education teachers in high poverty schools that have been teaching in the field of special education for more than five years. Included teachers were certified in special education and completed five years of experience teaching in the field of special education. (Five years is being utilized as the benchmark in response to the research of Darling-Hammond cited above.) The survey population included high poverty rural South Texas school districts within a 60 mile radius of Texas A&M University – Kingsville. High poverty schools were defined as schools with an economically disadvantaged population of at least sixty percent as identified through the state Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) that all public schools are required to use by the Texas Education Agency.

Project Methodology

Once the teachers were identified, they were included in the project population and interviewed. The interview was conducted on-site and face to face. When an on-site or telephone interview could not be arranged, the research survey was left with the teacher to be mailed with a stamped, return-addressed envelope. The sample population of thirty-eight completed surveys yielded a sample size of thirty-four surveys. The four surveys that were not included consisted of three teachers who had taught less than five years and one who had taught more than five years, but not in the area of special education. Working as part of the P-16 Educational Improvement Consortia at Texas A&M University – Kingsville in rural South Texas high poverty schools, we saw on a daily basis the effect novice teachers and uncertified teachers have on at-risk students.

The interview survey instrument was developed collaboratively with university staff experienced in special education teacher education and school district personnel in high poverty schools who experience either a high teacher turn over or difficulty recruiting teachers. The interview survey instrument utilized for data collection included the following nine questions:

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What teaching certificates do you have?
3. How many years have you been teaching in the area of special education?
4. How many school districts have you been employed by?
5. What factors caused you to leave your last school district?
6. What factors have contributed in keeping you in the classroom as a special education teacher?
7. What activities or factors has the school or district initiated to keep you in the classroom as a special education teacher?
8. What factors or events would cause you to leave or exit the classroom as a special education teacher?
9. What employment would you pursue if you were not a special education teacher?

Through qualitative data collection of the interview instrument, activities were compiled and evaluated to determine their effectiveness in promoting the retention of experienced rural South Texas special education teachers in high poverty schools. The activities and factors that had a negative impact on special education teacher retention were also collected and evaluated.

Study Findings

Results from the collected surveys follow. The overall teaching experience of the sample population was extensive with 88% of the teachers having at least ten years of teaching experience, 66% of the teachers having at least fifteen years of teaching experience, and 45% of the teachers

having at least twenty years of teaching experience as illustrated on Chart One below. One teacher had forty-four years of experience in the classroom.

Chart One: Total Years of Teaching Experience

5 – 9 Years	10 – 14 Years	15-19 Years	20 – 29 Years	30 Years or more
12%	24%	21%	24%	21%

Teaching experience in the field of special education was also high with 76% of the teachers had at least ten years in the classroom. See Chart Two below. The sample population also revealed that half of the included teachers have been employed by more than one school district, and hold more than one teaching certificate as shown on Chart Three and Four.

Chart Two: Years in Special Education

5 – 9 Years	10 – 14 Years	15-19 Years	20 – 29 Years	30 Years or more
24%	35%	15%	21%	6%

Chart Three: Number of Districts Employed During Teaching Career

1 District	2 or 3 Districts	4 or 5 Districts	More than 5 Districts
21%	50%	12%	18%

Chart Four: Number of Teaching Certificates

1 Certificate	2 Certificates	3 Certificates	More than 3 Certificates
29%	29%	15%	26%

The study found that the school district itself contributed to a special education teacher's departure through lack of campus and/or district support, assigning additional duties beyond the classroom, shortages of money or other financial incentive, and the specific teaching assignment. Conversely, district retention factors include technology assistance, additional money, administrative support, professional development and training, and the daily schedule.

At the campus level, retention factors include a small class size, additional money, specific teaching assignment, three months of vacation, co-workers, administrative support, inclusion, the students themselves, and the daily schedule. Other retention factors mentioned were vested retirement and self-satisfaction. Alternatively, campus factors leading to the departure from the profession include micromanagement, violent students, paperwork, student load, and mixed-ability classrooms.

The findings of the study coincide with the cited research. The climate within a school building and the workforce conditions do act as either a support or a deterrent for teacher retention (Westat, 2002b; Ingersoll, 2001; Gersten, et.al., 2001; Johnson, et.al., 2001). Likewise, working conditions that encourage the capabilities and worth of teachers contribute to retention (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2001, p. 40).

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The sample population for the study was selected from public schools located within a sixty mile radius from Kingsville, Texas, as determined by the Texas Mileage Guide. The public schools within the sixty mile radius must also have an economically disadvantaged student population of at least sixty percent.

Once the schools were chosen, researchers visited the school sites and interviewed special education teachers who had been teaching at least five years in the field of special education. When an on-site or telephone interview could not be arranged, the research survey was left with the teacher to be mailed with a stamped, return-addressed envelope. The sample population of thirty-eight completed surveys yielded a sample size of thirty-four surveys. The four surveys that were not included consisted of three teachers who

had taught less than five years and one who had taught more than five years, but not in the area of special education.

Results from the collected surveys follow. The overall teaching experience of the sample population was extensive with 88% of the teachers having at least ten years of teaching experience, 66% of the teachers having at least fifteen years of teaching experience, and 45% of the teachers having at least twenty years of teaching experience. One teacher had forty-four years of experience in the classroom.

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