

**Why Do Special Education Teachers Leave the Field? Possible Methods to Increase  
Retention**

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While many areas in education are experiencing teacher shortages (McKnab, 1995; Merrow, 1999), the retention of special education teachers in particular, is a critical concern in many schools across the nation. Even prior to the developing national teacher shortage, educators were voicing concerns about higher burnout and/or teacher attrition rates in special education as compared to general education (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1990). Many anticipate that the national teacher shortage may only exacerbate this growing need for special educators. McKnab (1995), for example estimated the annual attrition rate for special education teachers as between 9% and 10%, as compared to 6% among educators in other areas. More recently, a national survey of over 1,000 special educators conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) concluded: “Poor teacher working conditions contribute to the high rate of special educators leaving the field, teacher burnout, and substandard quality of education for students with special needs” (CEC 1998). Clearly, hidden within the growing national teacher shortage in all certification areas, the ongoing burnout of special education teachers has become an important liability in the provision of appropriate educational services to students with disabilities.

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the burnout/teacher retention problem in the field of special education, within the context of today’s classrooms. Further we will synthesize the available information in order to suggest steps that may be undertaken to ameliorate this problem. First, a synthesis of research on teacher burnout within special education is presented. Next, suggestions for increasing retention of teachers in special education are presented. Finally, politically risky options for special education teacher retention are presented.

## The Burnout Phenomenon In Special Education

Research has both documented higher turnover among special education teachers, and suggested a number of reasons for this phenomenon (Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller, 1997; McKnab, 1995; Singh & Billingsley, 1996). Table 1 presents a synopsis of the research that has been published since 1995. Many of these studies are recent enough to reflect the evolving nature of special education instruction, such as the recent expectations for inclusive instruction, the changes in disciplinary tactics as reflected in the recently mandated behavioral intervention plans, and the ever-increasing paperwork load on special education teachers.

Table 1

### Burnout Study Table of Results

AUTHOR/YEAR	METHODOLOGY	RESULTS
Boe, Bobbit, Cook (1997)	4,798 regular and special education teachers were given a survey in a national sample.	There was a higher turnover for special ed. teachers (20%) as compared reg. ed. teachers. (13%).
Whitaker (2000)	156 special ed. teachers in S. Carolina were given a questionnaire.	The perceived effectiveness of the mentoring was significantly correlated with the teachers' plans to remain in special ed. Critical components of mentoring are examined.
Miller, Brownwell, Smith (1999)	1,576 spec. ed. teachers in Florida were given a questionnaire.	Indicated that teachers left spec. ed. due to insufficient certification, perceptions of high stress, and perceptions of poor school climate. Teachers who transferred to reg. ed. had perceptions of high stress, and perceptions of poor school climate and were significantly younger than teachers remaining in special education.

Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, Harniss 2001	887 spec. ed. teachers from Silver City, Az, Wishbone, WA, and Sofia, TX were given a questionnaire.	The results indicated several critical factors to consider in order to increase retention and commitment. Stress due to job design, learning on the job, and support by principals or other teachers were critical.
Cooley, Yovanoff 1996	92 spec. ed. teachers along with related service providers were in a controlled study that evaluated the effects of two interventions--a series of stress-management workshops and peer-collaboration programs.	The results indicated that stress management and peer-collaboration programs show promise when providing on the job support for professionals at risk of burnout, and leaving.
Russ, Chiang, Rylance, Bongers 2001	139 students and 54 teachers in Virginia were given questionnaires and interviewed.	Higher caseloads appear correlated to teachers leaving special education.
Schnorr (1995)	1500 spec. ed. Teachers in Alaska were given a questionnaire.	A supportive principal was cited by 88% of the spec. ed. as an incentive to continue teaching. Deterrents to potential spec. ed. Teachers were paperwork, high caseloads, the number of required meetings, and job stress.
Brownell, Smith, McNellis, Miller 1997	93 randomly selected previous sp. ed. Teachers were interviewed by telephone in Florida.	Largest portion of teachers leave special ed. due to dissatisfaction with working conditions. Also, the majority of these teacher remain in other areas of education.
Singh, Billingsley 1996	658 special educators (159 EBD teachers and 499 other sped) in Virginia were given questionnaires through mail.	For both groups, the most important determinant for intent to stay was working conditions. Job satisfaction had a positive effect on intent to stay, and role-related problems had a negative effect on intent to stay. Also, stress had an adverse effect on intent to stay.
Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener, Weber 1997	4,798 regular and special education teachers from a 1998 national teacher follow-up survey.	Teacher turnover decreased as the following variables increased: teacher age, number of dependents, level of certification, the number of degrees since the last degee was earned.

## **Suggestions For Retention**

Next, A series of studies have documented higher levels of stress experienced by special education teachers in relation to their job responsibilities (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). While this research suggests one fruitful option to reduce burnout among special education teachers, the research also leaves a number of questions unaddressed. Based on these data, there are clear implications concerning how special education administrators and other administrators may wish to address the issues of burnout and teacher retention in special education. A number of additional options that have been fairly widely discussed are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

### Recommendations to Reduce Burnout

- Smaller class sizes and smaller caseloads are recommended to school districts to increase retention for special education teachers.
- More support and interaction from colleagues, administrators, and special education coordinators within the same school is recommended to assist in reducing stress and burnout for special education teachers.
- Observing other special education teachers for professional development purposes is recommended to decrease stress and burnout.
- Planning periods for special education teachers are recommended for school systems to assist in retention.
- Mentor programs for new special education teachers are recommended to assist with reducing stress.

- Stress management professional development workshops are recommended for school districts to assist in reducing stress and burnout.
- Having a clearly defined job description can assist in reducing stress and burnout.
- Proper placement of students with special needs can assist in reducing stress and burnout.
- Providing assistance with special education policies, procedures, and paperwork for novice teachers is a recommendation to improve recruitment and retention.
- Assisting novice teachers with discipline and classroom management will improve recruitment and retention.
- Orienting the beginning teachers to the school district and schools policies and procedures will improve recruitment and retention for special educators.

### **Politically Risky Options**

Finally, while the options presented previously have been suggested and fairly widely discussed, there are additional options, which represent some degree of administrative risk. These options may challenge our profession, and may impact how we, as special educators, respond to the critical need for teachers qualified to deal with the challenge of special needs students. However, with the critical need looming, we wished to include in this context, some politically risky options that have been briefly mentioned by others, as well as some suggestions of our own, which we wish to put on the agenda for public discussion. These options are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

#### **Politically Risky Options to Decrease Stress and Increase Retention**

- Providing a higher salary for special education teachers to increase retention for special educators.

- Hiring experienced teachers between the ages of 35 to 55 increases the maturity level of this professional group.
- Helping the pre-service teacher develop a more realistic view of the first year of teaching may help alleviate stress.
- Hiring fully certified master level teachers in special education classrooms will increase the salary base for these professionals.
- Making the demands placed on the beginning teacher reasonable and minimal can alleviate stress during the first year of teaching.
- Offering graduate courses at district expense that help prepare experience teachers to be mentors can increase the supply of certified teachers.
- Employing more male teachers, particularly minority male teachers, may enhance the teacher pupil relationships in special education classes, and decrease teacher stress.
- Providing of secretarial assistance to special educators—perhaps a 1/3 time secretary—for monitoring of meetings and management of required paperwork.
- Reconceptualizing special education procedures to reduce the paperwork responsibilities of special education teachers.
- Differentially reducing the case load among special educators such that teachers of students with behavioral disorders have fewer students than other special education teachers.

### **Conclusion**

We have presented data to document the critical shortage of teachers in special education, as well as numerous suggestions for enhancing retention and decreasing burnout of special education teachers. While the options discussed in the literature present a variety of choices for school district administrators, we have also offered several politically risky options, which may

need to be considered if we, as a profession, are to address this critical shortage area. Clearly, all professionals desire the most effective instructional options for special needs students which we can provide, and it may be time to consider a number of risky solutions to this growing problem.

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