Keeping the Committed

The Importance of Induction and Support Programs for New Special Educators

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New special educators face complex expectations during their first year of teaching. They have the same challenges as their general education colleagues in terms of managing a classroom, becoming familiar with a district's curriculum, acquiring information about the school and district where they work, and engaging in the communication and collaboration that are essential to becoming a member of a school team. They encounter, however, additional responsibilities that include

- Understanding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Amendments of 1997 (IDEA 97), its procedural requirements, and instructional applications for students with disabilities.
- Acquiring knowledge of special education forms, the state and school district accommodations for instruction and testing, and the district's special education resources, modified curricula for specific populations, and alternate assessment system.
- Developing modifications or accommodations to the general curriculum that allow students to access it successfully.
- Developing effective professional relationships with paraprofessionals who work as their classroom partners in providing services to students.
- Clarifying the school culture around issues of inclusion and their role in advocating for their students.
- Determining the availability of assistive technology devices and training to use them.
- Apprising themselves of complex medical procedures required by students and their responsibility to provide or coordinate those procedures.
- Documenting each student's progress toward individualized education program (IEP) goals.
- Collecting data when working with students with challenging behaviors.

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS LEAVE THE FIELD BECAUSE OF

- **INSUFFICIENT CERTIFICATION**
- **EXCESSIVE PAPERWORK**
- **THE STRESS OF WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**
- **THE LACK OF BALANCE BETWEEN EXTRINSIC REWARDS AND DEMANDS**
- **UNFULFILLED INTRINSIC REWARDS**
- **PERSONAL CHANGE FACTORS**
- **PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH STRESS**
- **FRUSTRATIONS WITH SCHOOL CLIMATE.**

The magnitude of the additional demands placed on new special educators exacerbates the existing frustrations and stresses that all new teachers experience. These demands contribute to new special educators leaving their positions in special education. Six percent of all teachers leave the field of teaching each year (Boe, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999) with an even higher 9.3% leaving at the end of their first year of teaching in urban school districts (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1999). On average, an additional 7.4% of special educators move to general education classrooms annually (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, & Barkanic, 1998). The reasons that special education teachers leave the field are well-documented, including insufficient certification, excessive paperwork, the stress of working with students with disabilities, the lack of balance between extrinsic rewards and demands, unfulfilled intrinsic rewards, personal change factors, perceptions of high stress, and frustrations with school climate (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Attrition of this magnitude aggravates the existing

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shortage of teachers qualified to fill special education positions. Current reports document the critical need for special educators in 98% of all school districts in the United States (American Association for Employment in Education, 1999; Recruiting New Teachers, Inc.). Norton (1999) notes that, while replacing a worker costs 25% of that person's salary, the higher cost of losing qualified teachers is paid by the students who do not have the opportunity to be taught by experienced teachers who have acquired expertise and insight into student learning.

The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education is a federally funded proactive and technologically current information center. Its goal is to enhance the nation's capacity to recruit, prepare, and retain highly qualified diverse educators and related services professionals for children and youth with disabilities. Through its affiliations with national organizations, other federally supported projects, universities, state departments of education, and local school districts, the Clearinghouse accumulates, analyzes, and disseminates information about special education recruitment and retention efforts across the nation.

The Need for Induction and Support Programs

Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Weber, (1995) noted the continuing critical need not only to recruit more persons into the field of special education but also to develop support and induction programs for new special educators. These support and induction programs assist new special educators to increase their instructional competence. As this occurs, their students progress more dependably, and teachers' satisfaction and confidence are enhanced. Feelings of satisfaction and confidence are associated with those teachers who choose to remain in teaching.

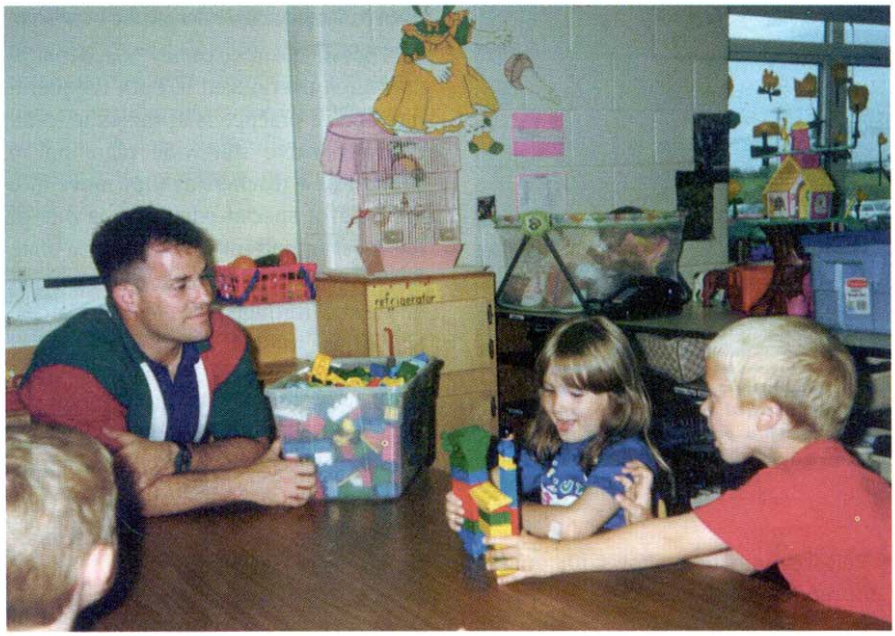
In its study of induction programs in large urban school districts, Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. (1999) reported a median retention rate of 93% at the end of the first year for teachers who participated in formal induction programs. Whitaker (2000) found that beginning special education teachers who had mentors that they rated as effective were more likely to remain in special education. These mentors had the following characteristics:

- They were special educators.
- They met with the new teacher frequently.
- They provided emotional support.
- They conveyed system information related to the teaching environments and to special education.
- They informed the new teacher of materials/resources.

The collection and dissemination of information about special education recruitment and retention efforts allow the Clearinghouse to be a resource for universities, states, and local school districts. Each of these entities has a responsibility not only to identify persons who want to begin fulfilling careers in education but also to retain those persons who have committed to serving students with disabilities. Induction programs for new special educators require a concentrated collaborative effort that infuses working environments with supports for the emotional, administrative, and instructional needs related to the challenges faced by new special educators (Boyer, 1999). Natural partners in the development of these induction and support programs are university faculty, state departments of education, and district-level administrators.

Hallmarks of the induction programs these partners have developed are evident in the three examples discussed here and include

- A mentor who is a special educator with knowledge and experience in the needs of the students being taught by the new special educator.



New teachers need support in developing individualized programs for students' unique needs.

SIX PERCENT OF ALL TEACHERS LEAVE THE FIELD OF TEACHING EACH YEAR, WITH AN EVEN HIGHER 9.3% LEAVING AT THE END OF THEIR FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING IN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS.

New teachers often need support and additional training in building collaborative relationships across age groups and diverse cultures.

- Release time that allows for guided observations of experienced special educators serving students with the same needs as those being taught by the new special educator.
- Access to communication technology that allows for communication with experienced special educators serving, or with knowledge of, students with the same needs as those being taught by the new special educator.
- Regularly scheduled group sessions that allow for new special educators to share experiences; ask advice of experienced teachers, trainers, or specialists; and gain skills and understanding.
- Content training in development of IEPs, working with paraprofessionals, managing the behavior of students to enhance learning, adapting curriculum, determining appropriate accommodations, differentiating instruction, and coordinating diagnostic results with selection of instructional methods.
- Reflection on teaching practices and their impact on student progress.

BEGINNING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO HAVE MENTORS THAT THEY RATE AS EFFECTIVE ARE MORE LIKELY TO REMAIN IN SPECIAL EDUCATION.

State Departments of Education

One possible source of new teacher support often overlooked in both the literature and in practice is at the state level. Comprehensive statewide planning to support new teachers as they move into the field of special education is one of the most important investments a state can make. Several states have addressed this issue through special task forces, long-term studies, short-term professional development, and even shorter-term pay incentives. To keep quality special education teachers in the field over time, however, new teachers must know they are supported at the state level in ways that are meaningful, productive, and long term.

One such program has been funded by the state legislature in Oregon to recruit and retain quality special education professionals. The Oregon Recruitment/Retention Project is housed at Western Oregon University in Monmouth, Oregon. Funded by the State Department of Education, the center works directly with local school districts to develop comprehensive recruitment and retention plans aimed at both attracting and keeping high-quality professionals in the special education professions. The project includes technical assistance to local school districts and presents regional workshops throughout the state. Project staff work both directly and indirectly with districts on designing beginning teacher support and mentor programs, as well as providing assistance in the districts' recruitment efforts. Aimed at assisting districts as they adopt or develop their own support programs, the project's target audiences include teachers new to the state or first-year teachers. In addition, the project's interactive Web site offers a forum for networking and exchanging teacher support and recruitment strategies, information on "grow your own" programs, state licensure topics, and mentoring and induction programs.

The Director of Teaching Research Division at Western Oregon University lists *increasing the number of qualified special education and related services personnel and the amount of time they stay in the field* as two of the three major goals of their state-level Recruitment/ Retention Project. The following activities are among those targeted to achieve this goal:

- Consultation to groups of special education administrators; such as state supervisory personnel, local education agency (LEA) directors, local superintendents, school principals, and human resource personnel.
- A list server and Web based survival kit that offers technical assistance and support for districts that choose a self-directed route for developing recruitment, "grow your own," teacher support, and mentoring programs.
- Direct assistance in capacity building for ongoing district-level identification of personnel needs, school climate, and recruitment and retention strategies.
- Case-study evaluation of the district's support activities to provide follow-up to the district's plan.
- A self-assessment tool to stimulate discussion for district teams to identify their challenges for attaining and maintaining qualified special education staff.

The Oregon Special Education Recruitment/Retention Project is one example of what a comprehensive statewide plan can do to make a powerful impact on the employment factors associated with work conditions and rewards that Billingsley (1993) referred to in her analysis of teacher career decisions. States can and must make significant contributions to the professional lives and subsequent satisfaction of new special education teachers, particularly during the first year of teaching.

University Trainers

Support at the classroom level is perhaps the most important for new teachers. The daily interaction with students and adults presents the biggest challenge of a new teacher's career. Research on new teacher attrition has indicated that what happens *inside* the classroom is an important indicator of whether that teacher will come back next year. Yet, how many school districts offer weekly one-on-one consultation with mentors for their new special education teachers, much less multiple

adult interactions on an ongoing basis throughout the induction year?

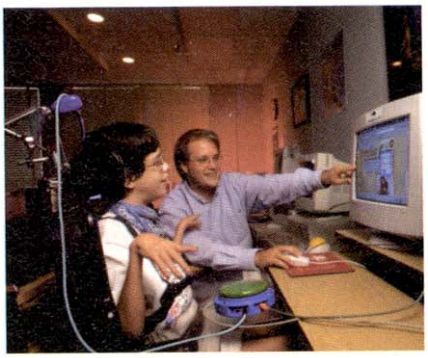
One such program comes to the aid of new teachers from a source traditionally less involved in the lives of teachers once they are in the classroom. The College of Education at Southwest Texas State University, a large regional university in the hill country of Texas, has developed a highly successful program for both preparing new special education teachers from less traditional backgrounds and retaining them in the field. Students in Career Alternatives in Special Education (CASE), an accelerated master's level program, spend their second year in the program as paid interns, under the supportive supervision of CASE staff and mentors from their new schools. The philosophy of the program is to set up resource networks within the school for each intern. Support from full-time mentor teachers in the interns' schools is augmented by supervisors who are affiliated with the CASE program and are retired special education directors. The prior experience of these supervisors adds to the program's level of integrity and credibility. Both formative and summative evaluations inform the CASE program director and the full-time mentor teachers as to the current and emerging needs of the new teachers. This on-the-job training and support component gives nontraditional students with bachelor's degrees in fields other than education a chance to reinvent themselves as teachers of students with disabilities in a much shorter period of time than traditional programs allow. It uses the experiences and strengths of their previous education to contribute to the new skills they acquire through both academic coursework and practical field experience.

Fifty percent of the students in the CASE Program are from military backgrounds; all students are mid-career changers, and many receive tuition remission on successful completion of the academic hours. Twenty-one cohorts have advanced through the program over the past 6 years, with 92 of the original 143 students being certified in generic special education. At any given time, about 40 students are enrolled in classes. CASE program staff provide supervision to induction-year teachers through four half-day seminars, a regular news-memo, and e-mail contact. To date, 92% of program completers have remained in the teaching field.

The CASE Program is currently developing predictors from its new teacher database that will further inform the field as to what factors support retention over time. Clearly, there is a vital role for colleges and universities to play not only in the preparation of new teachers but also in their long-term retention. The CASE Program at Southwest Texas State University is one program leading the way.

Local District Level

Local directors of special education and principals know well the hiring dilemma faced each year as new teaching positions and those vacated through attrition or retirement go unfilled. In Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Schools, however, an aggressive and expanding support program strives to support new general educators and new special educators as a means of easing the transition from student to teacher, while enhancing the likelihood that teachers will remain in the field and district. In this program, teachers of students with learning disabilities at the elementary and secondary levels and of students with emotional disturbance at the secondary level are included with their new general education colleagues in the district's Beginning Teacher Induction Program (BTIP). They participate in a 17-session course throughout the year taught by an experienced teaching coach. New special educators work with a mentor who is typically a special education teacher in the new teacher's school. This component of the BTIP focuses on experiences a new teacher in the general education classroom will have during the first year of teaching. Because many of these special education teachers serve students predominantly in inclusive settings, the opportunity to learn side by side with their general education colleagues provides a common frame of reference for collaboration and instruction.



New teachers value instructional support for implementing IEPs.

An unusual aspect of BTIP, however, is its optional component for elementary teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities, emotional disabilities, and early childhood developmental delays. Teachers who chose this option also attend a 17-session course that meets throughout the year. Its topics have been devised, however, to address the needs of teachers working with students who are instructed through a modified or specially designed curriculum and who present particularly challenging behaviors. Experienced teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities teach this class.

Each teacher in this aspect of the BTIP has a mentor who is experienced in the instructional, developmental, and emotional needs of the students with whom the new teacher is working.

THE GOAL OF THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR PROFESSIONS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION IS TO ENHANCE THE NATION'S CAPACITY TO RECRUIT, PREPARE, AND RETAIN HIGHLY QUALIFIED DIVERSE EDUCATORS AND RELATED SERVICES PROFESSIONALS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES.

NATURAL PARTNERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW INDUCTION AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS ARE UNIVERSITY FACULTY, STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION, AND DISTRICT-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS.

These experienced teachers who volunteer to be mentors receive a stipend and participate themselves in a six-session course that is taught by school-based administrative staff. Mentors arrange for their own observations of the new teachers, the new teacher's visit to the mentor's class, and visits to other schools and classrooms so that the new teacher can observe effective practice in action. Mentors and new teachers meet or remain in touch regularly and keep logs of issues to be discussed, resolution of concerns, and reflections on experiences during this 1-year mentorship. The number of teachers involved in this special education component of BTIP has grown from 16 in 1997-98 to 50 in 1999-00. As a participant in the program said, "No matter how prepared you are, there are some things graduate school can never prepare you for . . . but, with the mentor and so many inservices and classes, by the end of the year I knew what I was doing. I felt confident in what I was doing because they continued to train me."

Taking Action

Six actions you can take to support new special education teachers:

In your state:

- Call your state director of special education and state legislator to inquire as to what programs your state has in place to support new special education teachers.
- Offer to volunteer your time to work in state-level initiatives that are striving to improve the professional lives of new teachers.

At your institution of higher education (IHE):

- Find out what areas of special education are experiencing critical shortages in your geographic area and form partnerships with local school districts to develop new teacher support programs that incorporate the expertise of both IHE and LEA personnel.
- Infuse activities into your training programs that support new teachers in the field as a part of their extended field experiences, such as on-line chat groups and in class supports from doctoral students with previous classroom experience.

In your school district or school building:

- Volunteer to be a mentor. Mentors grow as much professionally during a mentorship as the new teacher. Mentorships help to retain teachers in the field.
- Obtain a copy of *Retention of Special Education Professionals*, published by the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (available at http://www.special-ed-careers.org), and undertake one of the activities for classroom teachers, principals, and district administrators.

Seven ways administrators can support new special education teachers in the classroom:

- Adopt policies within your school district that alleviate paperwork by training paraprofessionals to assist in organization of forms, student record keeping, and data collection; streamlining the paper process; and eliminating repetitive paperwork.
- Match beginning teachers' assignments with their prior experiences and training.
- Use mentor programs to assist and provide support for beginning teachers.
- Create time for new teachers to meet with mentors and other support personnel to discuss instructional issues during the school day.
- Provide specific feedback, encouragement, and continued opportunities for growth in areas that are most relevant to new special education teachers, such as behavior management, collaborative skills, and curriculum content.
- Provide technology that allows networking with one another, through online chat groups or listserves.
- Provide a structure to facilitate better communication between general and special educators at the building and district levels.

For more information about how to support new special education teachers, check the Oregon Special Education Recruitment and Retention Project's *Support for Beginning Teachers,* online at http://www.tr.wou.edu/rrp and the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education at http://www.special-ed-careers.org or call 1-800-641-7824.

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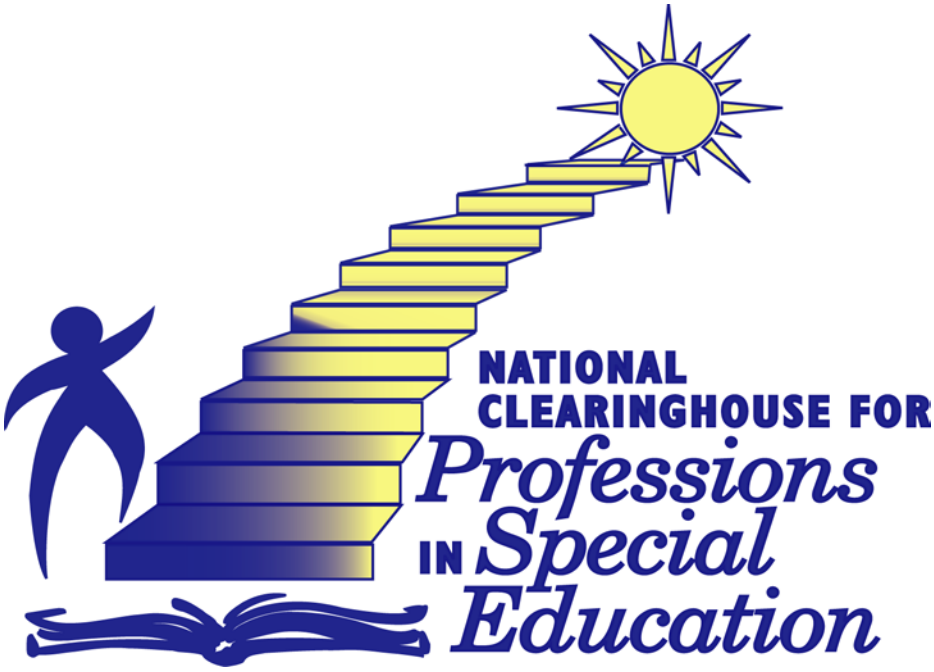
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