

Recruitment and Retention of Rural Special Educators

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Abstract

Attracting and retaining qualified special education teachers is a problem many rural school districts are facing. Districts in rural areas suffer from a lack of qualified special education teacher candidates. Accordingly, the issue of having enough qualified special educators is not easily solved. It is not just a question of turning out enough graduates, but finding candidates that are capable of teaching and being successful in a rural setting. A partnership between school districts, colleges, and communities will provide a framework for future success. This partnership will benefit both future teachers and the rural students they serve.

Recruitment and Retention of Rural Special Educators

The special education teacher shortage is an issue facing school districts across the nation. Attracting and then retaining the teachers is an even greater obstacle for rural school districts. It is necessary for schools to sell themselves to prospective special education teacher candidates. This may be accomplished by focusing on the attributes of teaching in rural school districts.

Lemke (1994) said schools must stress the attributes of the school and the community. Studies showed that rural teachers were generally more satisfied than ones in urban districts. The positives included: small class sizes, get to know the students, less behavior concerns, more parent participation, and having a greater impact on students' lives. In addition, teachers had more autonomy and better working relationships with parents. Eaton and Bean (1993) asserted the reason students persisted in college could be grouped into three areas. These areas included personal, environmental, and organizational. Similarly, these same areas influenced a teacher's intent to remain in a teaching position.

Having qualified special education teachers is vitally important because students who require special education services are at-risk. The need for these professionals is

even more critical in many rural areas. This paper will address the nature of the shortage, reasons contributing to longevity among rural special educators, and what leads to and builds resiliency in rural special education teachers. The roles of colleges, school districts, and communities in solving the problem will also be discussed.

Nature of the Shortage of Rural Special Educators

Attracting and retaining qualified special education teachers is a difficult task. Whitworth (1999) noted that 19% of Texas special education teachers were not fully certified. In rural districts the number rose to 36%. Other surveys report that within the first five years of teaching roughly forty percent of beginning rural special education teachers leave the field (Beeson & Strange, 2003).

According to Beeson and Strange (2003), in some Southern and Midwestern states almost one-third of all students attended rural schools, meaning the schools were located in communities that had less than 2,500 people. In twenty states the percentage of rural schools was even higher. In some states, such as Nebraska and South Dakota, the percentage of rural schools was 60% and 77%, respectively. Therefore, the need to attract and retain teachers, specifically special education teachers, to rural areas is critical.

The shortage of rural educators is a multi-faceted problem. From the outset, the teacher candidate pool was more limited than in metropolitan areas (McCreight, 2000). Commonly mentioned reasons for the shortage of special education teachers in rural districts were sub-standard facilities, lower pay, and fewer benefits (McCreight, 2000). Consequently, attracting teachers to these communities was difficult given the restrictions of fewer potential candidates, monetary constraints, and higher attrition of teachers once they were employed within the district.

The result was a reduced amount of qualified and certified teachers teaching students from low socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom would benefit from additional services and innovative instructional strategies (McCreight, 2000). Garnes, Menlove, and Adams (2002) explained that it was not the number of candidates per position, but finding the right candidates to fill the positions. Following this line of reasoning, it is essential that the teaching candidates be the right fit for the position, the school, and the community. Schools may have to use innovative hiring and retention strategies to attract and retain qualified teachers.

Many schools selected applicants who did not have a long-term commitment to the school or community (Garnes et al., 2002). Consequently, they were only employed in the district for a year or two. For that reason, it is not sufficient for the teacher candidate to just have the proper teacher certification.

The key to alleviating the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas may be to finding the right candidate who prefers the rural lifestyle and can adjust not only to the way things are done in a small school, but also to the expectations of a rural community. If the district could address the shortages with individuals who enjoyed the rural lifestyle, perhaps they would remain there long-term and become active, contributing citizens within the community. Both the school and the community would benefit from this type of candidate.

Why Teachers Stay

Recognition of the reasons which contribute to teacher longevity is important in increasing retention of special educators in rural school districts. Astin's Theory of Involvement (as cited in Hutley, 2006) said individuals who become active in an

organization had a greater chance of staying in the position. This involvement also leads to a higher level of success. The Tinto Model (Tinto, 1993) suggested the goal should be to incorporate individuals into the academic and social community of the organization. Involvement in the institution is critical. This is accomplished through personal contacts with peers and other community members. The interaction has to be both formal and informal. Involvement leads to greater satisfaction and success.

It is important for rural school districts not only to attract teachers to their communities, but also to realize why existing educators choose to remain in rural and sometimes isolated areas. Harmon (2001) found some interesting reasons why rural educators chose to remain in their positions. The reasons that led teachers to teach and remain in rural areas revolved primarily around lifestyle issues. First, the lifestyle and small town environment was more conducive to raising a family. A lower cost of living and a slower pace of living were cited as reasons for choosing rural schools. Second, teachers felt they knew the students and had more of an affect on their lives. Teachers had smaller class sizes, had more classroom autonomy, and knew the students as individuals. More independent teaching decisions were made in rural schools which allowed for more ownership of student success. Third, teachers felt safe in the classroom and the community. There was the perception that small schools had fewer discipline problems and more parental support than larger schools. Collins (1999) confirmed this conclusion by saying most rural schools had less discipline problems.

In general, rural teachers were less stressed. Students and parents had more respect for educators. Many of the attributes of job satisfaction were seen in other educational settings, but rural teachers were less concerned with salary and benefit issues

and more focused on quality of life and job issues. Examples included cooperation within the school and between the teachers and parents. Teachers also pointed to the fact that students were better behaved and showed more respect. Last, it seemed many educators who chose to teach in rural areas did so because they enjoyed being a part of the community (Ruhl-Smith & Smith, 1993).

Even though some rural schools had financial problems and low salaries, the benefits of the rural lifestyle outweighed the negatives in many instances (Berry & Hirsch, 2005). Satisfactory job conditions were important to teachers. Berry and Hirsch (2005) cited studies out of North and South Carolina which showed improving the working conditions of teachers enhanced teacher retention. In the report, teachers were surveyed from hard to staff schools. The data showed teachers who had better working conditions had students with higher achievement scores. As a result of the report, additional schools were added to the pilot program which featured financial support and ongoing reforms to improve working conditions in the targeted schools.

Burns-Nielson (2001) contended it was up to the school districts to recruit and retain the right candidates. Rural school districts should market themselves based on the following qualities: lower cost of living, the quality of life, strong local support for schools, strong support for teachers, and fewer discipline problems. Specifically, school districts should market themselves on quality of life issues to attract viable candidates. Especially since key reasons educators stayed in rural areas were quality of life issues. Harmon (2001) concluded that it was lifestyle and comfort issues involving work and community that led teachers to remain in rural settings.

Teaching candidates must be the right fit for the teaching position, the community, and the rural lifestyle. Long-term rural educators shared many of the same characteristics. Many rural teachers came from a rural background. Long-term teachers surveyed in New York said they liked the school because they had family in the area or thought the communities were good places to raise their families. Harmon (2001) went on to say, the appeal of rural schools had to be sold to the candidates. This was accomplished by promoting the community as an escape from the city to the values of the rural lifestyle (Harmon, 2001). Administrators must target candidates who have a rural background or with personal characteristics that will help them transition into the rural community. This was particularly important when it came filling positions in racially or culturally unique rural districts (Berry & Hirsch, 2005). In order for this approach to be successful, teachers must be aware of the culture, no matter if is Native American, Hispanic, African American, or agrarian. It is essential that the candidate understand that moving to a particular area may be difficult. The candidate must be knowledgeable in both their subject area and the distinctiveness of the community (Lemke, 1994).

Colleges must prepare candidates to meet the changing landscape of a more culturally diverse society. Collins (1999) suggested schools use ‘grow your own’ strategies. He went on to say, most rural teachers came from the area, so it made sense to have programs to assist local residents in their goal to become educators (Collins, 1999).

Why Teachers are Content

Job satisfaction in rural schools and teacher retention were synonymous (Ruhl-Smith & Smith, 1993). Satisfaction with one’s situation was determined by various factors. High self-efficacy as described by Bandura (1994) led to increased job

satisfaction. This self-efficacy component can be applied to job satisfaction among rural educators. Teachers who had more autonomy and control had a higher degree of satisfaction. Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in his or her ability to accomplish a task or overcome an obstacle. Self-efficacy tended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people felt they could accomplish something they had a better chance of doing it. Building higher self-efficacy in a person resulted in a more satisfied employee (Bandura, 1994). In the teaching field this goal could be fulfilled through progressively increased teacher responsibility, with the necessary administrative support. Accordingly, factors which led to higher self-efficacy also led to job satisfaction (Pajares, 2002).

Factors leading to higher job satisfaction were the ability to individualize lessons, more autonomy over day-to-day classroom planning, more involvement in the decision-making processes of the school, increased interaction between faculty members, more school-based decision making, and finally, more communication between home and school (Ruhl-Smith & Smith, 1993). These aspects led to more collaboration between school personnel. Additionally, teachers who were more involved in school management had higher levels of job satisfaction. Teachers in rural settings had higher job satisfaction because they preferred to be there (Ruhl-Smith & Smith, 1993).

Teachers who had high levels of job satisfaction exhibited less stress. Stress determined how innovative an educator was in the classroom. In order for teachers to thrive, they must be supported by the educational community. The educational community included school officials, parents, students, and their professional peers

(Lumsden, 1998). It was up to administrators to foster empowerment in teachers and to show them they were important.

High job satisfaction led to high morale in teachers (Lumsden, 1998). Morale, as defined by Lumsden (1998), was a state of mind, feeling, or attitude about a job. The main factor that affected morale was first and foremost, a healthy school environment. Principals that promoted a healthy school environment by handling unforeseen events in the school had teachers with higher morale. Teacher morale and satisfaction with the job go hand-in-hand. Teachers who had high morale were generally more successful in instilling ideas and the desire to learn in their students. Teacher job satisfaction was higher when the workplace environment was positive. This was true with all types and sizes of schools (Lumsden, 1998).

Lumsden (1998) also found strong parental support of both the teacher and the school led to higher job satisfaction and better morale. Parents played a key role in the teacher retention puzzle. Teachers who had parental support had higher levels of job satisfaction. Teachers showed more enthusiasm when students were receptive in the classroom. The eagerness of the students inspired the educators.

What Leads to Resilient Teachers

School districts and communities strengthened resiliency in teachers by providing a mentor and an induction program for beginning teachers. School districts also fostered resiliency by having workshops and training for new and existing teachers. Having contact with other teachers in their academic field contributed to resiliency (Collins, 1999). Milstein (n.d.) stated educators who had an interest in networking with other professionals in their discipline had a higher level of resiliency.

New teachers needed support during the induction phase and first few years of teaching to build resiliency (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). This support fostered resiliency and helped new teachers become more successful. It was important not to place recent graduates in extremely difficult positions or ones that had a high rate of turnover. Some schools were setting new teachers up for failure by placing them on difficult campuses or in volatile classrooms (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). By not placing incoming teachers in difficult situations new educators were given the opportunity to grow, get additional training, and seek support from other teachers and administrators. This growth process had the effect of developing resiliency in teachers (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001).

Lemke (1994) believed rural districts needed to use 'grow your own' strategies to find qualified teachers. She cited a study by Schmuck & Schmuck which found that 90% of the interviewed teachers had local or area ties. Schools should concentrate on attracting candidates from the area or recruiting paraprofessionals who were already employed in the district. These types of individuals were more likely to remain in the district and may become long-term resilient teachers.

Resilient educators showed a higher level of determination and a strong desire not to fail. A partnership between teachers, colleges, communities, and the schools was significant in building resiliency in teacher candidates. Teachers had to grow personally, but other entities fostered that growth by providing training and support along the way (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001; Milstein, n.d.).

Summary of the Research

Rural school districts had more difficulty attracting and retaining special education teachers. The literature showed the problem to be multi-faceted. The literature cited isolation and lack of cultural activities as key factors in the shortage of teachers. Low pay and inferior benefits also contributed to the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas, as well as excessive paperwork, lack of administrative support, role confusion, and failure to adjust to the community.

It was not known whether schools were not doing their job in holding on to teachers or whether it was something within special education teachers that caused them to accept and leave positions in rural districts. Do colleges share some of the blame for the low retention of special education teachers? Are teachers not receiving enough experience or the proper experiences while still in college? Is the prospective teacher not cut out to be a special educator? Does the teacher know what they are getting into in terms of the position or what it takes to adjust to the rural lifestyle? Or do communities share some of the responsibility for the low retention of special education teachers? Are they not welcoming to newcomers or do they not provide enough incentives for teachers to stay in the area?

According to the literature, higher pay and benefits were not the total solution. Schools needed to look beyond the teacher's certification and focus on candidates who displayed characteristics of resiliency, could handle the responsibilities, and appreciate the rural lifestyle. The literature went on to suggest that rural teacher candidates had to be the right fit for their future schools and communities. They had to have a rural background, come from the area, or be willing to adjust to living and working in the rural

setting. Schools and communities need to promote themselves to candidates. Finally, colleges need to implement programs that have a rural component. The shortage of rural special educators can not be addressed with turning out more teacher candidates, but must be dealt with by a total effort by colleges, school districts, and communities.

Recommendations for Future Practices

It is important to realize that colleges, communities, and rural schools are crucial to solving the problem of attracting and retaining qualified special education teachers. A combined effort by all entities can be an effective approach to solving the issue.

With this in mind, rural special education teachers can be prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in a rural district through the effective implementation of programs by colleges and universities. Unique strategies can be implemented to recruit, train, and support future teacher candidates. Colleges can educate their students not only in teaching practices, but also in meeting the challenges of working in a rural setting. For instance, it may be necessary to develop specific courses to help teacher candidates better understand the distinctive nature of the rural lifestyle and the unique aspects of rural schools. Courses that involve the study of specific regional cultures, religions, and history would be appropriate. Courses that involve the characteristics of the human populations would also be suitable. Colleges can also provide assistance to first- and second-year teachers. New teachers need to have continued support from their institution. College mentors and an available support network at the university level can be used, along with workshops and trainings implemented by the school district.

Rural communities play an integral part in the recruitment of special educators. They can create a welcoming environment to candidates by meeting the needs of the

citizens, maintaining a safe community, and supporting the school. It is important to remember that many rural communities revolve around the school. Therefore, it is essential for the community to help maintain and support both for the school and the teachers. New teachers need to experience that feeling when they arrive in the community. The communities can promote themselves to show what their area has to offer. If communities can project the image of a safe community with a focus on family, new and current teachers may be more likely to remain and contribute to the school and community as a whole.

Still, school districts have the greatest burden of providing support for incoming and current special education teachers. New teachers need strong mentors. For this reason, it is important to focus on cooperation and collaboration within the school system. This partnership is essential to long-term success of teachers. An atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration will help new and current special education teachers survive the first few years of teaching. Therefore, the administration, teachers, and other school personnel need to work together to create a supportive atmosphere.

An idea often overlooked by school districts is to recruit within their ranks to find promising future candidates. These could be paraprofessionals, current students, or members of the community such as substitute teachers or parents who consistently volunteer in the school system. These individuals are familiar with the school system, know the local culture, are interested in education, and generally have a stake in the community.

It is important to realize the value of continued training and staff development of teachers to long-term successful employment. Colleges, as stated previously, can prepare

the candidates in the ways of rural school districts and the rural lifestyle. School districts, in conjunction with teaching institutions, can provide ongoing training in areas such as discipline, special education law, paperwork, and best teaching practices. This ongoing training would insure that both incoming teachers and current teachers have the best available information. The guidance should be ongoing because the field of special education is not static. It is constantly changing. The teachers need the most up-to-date information and knowledge of the field.

Conclusion

School districts, colleges, and communities can address the shortage of rural special education teachers through a concerted effort. Attracting highly qualified special educators and then retaining them can be accomplished by implementing strategies which foster teacher candidate training, support of candidate during the induction phase, and continued assistance from the colleges, the schools, and the communities. This concerted effort will help special education teachers and the students they educate.

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