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ABSTRACT

The summary of discussion from a 1980 Baltimore (MD) conference on implementing P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, in rural areas focuses on the problems facing special education in rural, remote, and isolated areas and suggests action for change. Work group recommendations are discussed for three main topics (sample subtopics in parentheses): cost effective service delivery approaches (staff development and effective use of personnel, parental and community involvement, community particiption, cost effective communications, cost effective energy and transportation strategies, and cost effective child find strategies); personnel retention and recruitment (incentive strategies, professional and community support, inservice training and staff development, and teacher retraining and educational options); and ways to capitalize on positive rural attributes and attitudes (working with parents and children in the rural community and changing public opinion). (CL)

* The Baltimore Conference

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC LAW 94-142 IN RURAL AREAS

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The Associa on for eta Citizen onal Research and Demonstra tion Institute wishes to its ude to Dr. Doris Helge for valuable help in prov din ba on and suggestions for conference format, and materia ed this document from the National Rural Research Po of this doc t were take from published works and persons in ted in study ing this matter further may contact Dr. Helge at Center for Innova tion and Development Murray State University, Murray Kentucky 42071.

INTRODUCTION

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act is drastically altering the complexion of public school programs for mentally retarded and other handicapped children. Contrary to the traditional practice of excluding severely impaired students from publicly supported educational services, Public Law 94-142 requires that all handicapped students receive a free, appropriate public education.

How well are the principles of this act being implemented in rural areas? What are the special problems associated with serving the educational needs of handicapped students in locations that are sometimes geographically isolated?

It is relatively easy to visualize one of America's great urban areas. Our large population centers have relatively well-defined borders — to a large extent, the people within those borders have been counted and classified into recognizable socioeconomic and ethnic groups. And, while the needs of these people are not always adequately met, their access to available services is clearly greater than that of their rural peers.

On the other side of the population coin are the country's more sparsely populated regions — borderless areas both large and small ranging from one end of the nation to the other. To classify these places as "rural" does little to define the needs of the people within them. Detroit, Michigan, and San Antonio, Texas, may be as different as night and day, but they have a great deal more in common than the Indian lands of Arizona, the "hollers" of West Virginia and the farm regions of Kansas.

In spite of individual differences, there is a tendency to vaguely define rural areas as "whatever's left over when the city runs out." Rural areas are often hard to reach. Many are even difficult to find. Relatively speaking, few people live there. Yet, approximately two-thirds of the nation's public

school districts are classified as rural, remote or isolated — hardly a fair description of a "leftover" population. More importantly, the proportion of the country's unserved and underserved handicapped children is markedly higher in rural settings.

The needs of handicapped children in rural areas is a subject that demands immediate and thorough attention. The traditional problems associated with implementing comprehensive special education programs are compounded in rural settings. High non-enrollment rates, mounting service costs, resistance to outside interference, and pressing teacher recruitment and retention problems are just a few of the issues that need answers.

The purpose of the Baltimore Conference was to identify creative approaches to dealing with the problems of special education in rural America, and to recommend promising directions for future action programs. Conference participants included professionals from the field of special education and a broad range of other disciplines. On hand were state special education directors, university and secondary teachers, researchers, school administrators, communications specialists, representatives from health service agencies and representatives from federal departments and bureaus concerned with rural education.

Conferees took part in a series of "brainstorming" work group sessions designed to develop strategies in three aspects of rural educational needs: cost-effective service delivery approaches, personnel retention and recruitment and methods of capitalizing on positive rural attributes and attitudes.

The purpose of this document is to accurately reflect the problems, issues and recommendations for future consideration emanating from the Baltimore Conference.

Every [illegible]ed Child Has The Right To:

- A fre[illegible] education . . .
- Placem[illegible]ec[illegible]ns based on informal and formal evaluati[illegible]s with input from the s[illegible]ent's parents . . .

  Prog[illegible]m[illegible]g in [illegible]e "least restrictive environment" possib[illegible] for the indiv[illegible]al

  An [illegible]idualiz[illegible] educational program appropriate to the student's nee[illegible] . .

- Peri[illegible]c rev[illegible]ev[illegible] of the appropriateness of the educational [illegible]an, with parental input . .

A [illegible]um[illegible]ary of some of the major [illegible]e[illegible]uire[illegible]ents of Public Law 94-142, Edu[illegible]cation for All Handicapped [illegible]dre[illegible] Act.

THE [illegible]GE

Wh[illegible]eally know about [illegible]ne[illegible]s of handicapped children in rural areas [illegible]most part, such nee[illegible]s a[illegible]e quite clear and long-standing. Profe[illegible]s in the field of special [illegible]ducation have learned about them by meet[illegible]ns [illegible]ead-on in the count[illegible]ural communities. A great many of the a[illegible]s in this area of concer[illegible]e come thro[illegible]h th[illegible]e dedication of teach[illegible]a[illegible]trators and paren[illegible] have found their own answers — beca[illegible]th[illegible] to. Quite often t[illegible]ave been neither adequate funds, prop[illegible]ator[illegible]s nor sufficient pe[illegible]el to do the job.

W[illegible]uc[illegible]e[illegible]severance reflec[illegible]irably on the self-sufficient nature of ru[illegible]me[illegible]a. perseverance is [illegible]enough. Cost-effective systems of deliv[illegible]g[illegible] serv[illegible]ces are needed. A[illegible]ter understanding of the special outlo[illegible]an[illegible]ttitudes of rural po[illegible]ations is essential to success. And there[illegible]a pres[illegible]ing need for perso[illegible]e who not only understand the task at hanc[illegible]t are[illegible]lling to go where t[illegible] are needed and see the job through.

Trac[illegible]onal Rural Problems

As mentioned, traditional problems of implementing special education problems are frequently magnified in the rural setting. A brief overview of some of the problems discussed by conference participants includes:

- The non-enrollment rate of school-aged children in rural communities is twice that found in urban areas.
- Cost per unit of specialized services is significantly higher in rural America due to such factors as scarce professional resources, transportation barriers, etc.

- Rural school districts are frequently characterized as resistant to change" and "suspicious of outside interference." They are proud of their traditions and sometimes perceive mandated change — such as Public Law 94-142 — as threats to their ability to control their own destiny.
- Some local districts do not favor expenditures for handicapped students, feeling that these individuals will not become productive members of society.
- The comprehensive human service programs that constitute adjuncts to urban special education systems are severely limited in rural areas.
- Rural parents typically believe that school personnel are experts and know what is best for students. They are, therefore, inclined to be agreeable to any kind of service provided for their children, whether appropriate or not.
- Most rural areas do not have local chapters of parent-oriented advocacy organizations, such as the Association for Retarded Citizens and the Association for Children With Learning Disabilities.
- Rural school personnel are often expected to be "all things to all people," in contrast to the situation in areas with a greater availability of specialists.
- Recruiting and retaining qualified staff to educate handicapped children are major problems for local education agencies.

As a result of these and other factors, the effective implementation of Public Law 94-142 in rural areas poses a critical challenge to the American education system. Some of the problems faced today stem from a failure to recognize the essential differences between rural and urban needs. Often, urban service delivery models have simply been "picked up and dropped unchanged" into the rural arena. No matter how good these programs might be, they were never meant to be applied to isolated, sparsely settled locations with long-standing cultural backgrounds that often openly conflict with inner city or suburban needs and lifestyles.

Additionally, what little information that has been available concerning rural special education has more often than not focused on a specific district or subculture. And, as pointed out earlier, while portions of both Alaska and Tennessee share rural characteristics, their problems and needs differ drastically.

The lack of coherent data on rural schools has led to some piece-meal, and not always satisfactory, solutions. For some time, both state legislatures and professionals in the field of education have tried to solve

the problems of ru[illegible]ols by making their districts appear to be larger. Consol[illegible]lation and [illegible]ization efforts have reduced the number of one-room schools and [illegible]stricts, but have done little to alleviate their inherent problems.

Too often, sugge[illegible]r change have originated outside the rural community. Recomme[illegible] from such quarters generally fail to recognize either the positive [illegible]ve characteristics of the rural location in question. Much of th[illegible]egarding rural service delivery systems and strategies assume[illegible]ort of "standard" rural district with equivalent resources — that [illegible]pattern is automatically transferable to another. Assumptions of t[illegible]e fail to recognize the fact that in addition to other individual d[illegible]es, rural school enrollments range from very few students to 2,500. [illegible]e located in geographical districts incorporating from less than 50 [illegible]to 50,000 persons.

Pinning Down the Problem

Dr. Doris I. Helge, Director of Murray State University's Center for Innovation and Development in Murray, Kentucky, informed conference participants of the results of a recent study by the National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project, funded by the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. Dr. Helge, project director, noted that the purpose of the study was to investigate nationally problems in implementing comprehensive special education programming in rural areas. The project involved 19 (38%) of the nation's state education agencies. Using data from comprehensive literature reviews, collaboration with other national groups and extensive field-test processes, the project compiled in-depth profiles of rural problems and needs.

Cultural, geographic, climatic, socioeconomic and other inhibiting factors were analyzed as they related to implementation of Public Law 94-142. All major aspects of the law — Least Restrictive Environment, Due Process Procedures, Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) and parental involvement — were identified as problematic for rural schools. Three primary hindering factors were predominant: teacher retention and recruitment problems, attitudinal problems and problems based on rural terrain.

Results of Phase I of this study, reported by Dr. Helge, helped conferees further identify specific educational problems of rural areas. A brief summary of the findings of this extensive study follows:*

- Ninety-four percent of those surveyed indicated that recruiting and retaining qualified staff to educate handicapped children were major problems for rural local education agencies. Only one state in the northwest reported no difficulty in this area of concern. Many state officials expressed serious doubts that this problem could be solved without

* Percentages are based upon data from 18 of the 19 states surveyed.

modification of current certification regulations. Social isolation, extreme weather conditions, inadequate housing and low salaries created conditions which made it most difficult to employ special education staff in rural schools. Some positions remained unfilled for months — others for years.

Many rural special education staff members who were hired were young and inexperienced. Social and cultural isolation reportedly encouraged most of these teachers to abandon rural schools as soon as openings occurred in more urban settings. Some states estimated an annual teacher turnover of 30-50%, with almost complete turnover every three years. Attrition rates such as these had serious ramifications for personnel development and program stability.

- Attendant cultural and geographic factors were serious service delivery inhibitors as 83% of all states surveyed reported "long distances between schools and services" as prominent problems, while 89% reported "local education agency resistance to change," and 72% reported "suspicion of outside interference."

  Residents of rural areas clearly value tradition. A general suspicion of "innovations" was reported, plus a reluctance to change practices without a clear demonstration that change would in fact prove better than what existed. "External forces" were perceived as a threat to the community. In some states, local districts refused federal funding rather than adjusting programs to meet the requirements of Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the 1975 Amendments to the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act.

- Eight states (44%) reported that language differences among population subcultures hindered implementation of Public Law 94-142. This item was checked by six of the seven states surveyed in the northwest, and by one in both the southwest and mid-American regions.

- Sixty-seven percent of the school districts reported that cultural differences hamper local efforts to fully implement Public Law 94-142. Additionally, some cultures concerned did not place the same value on education as the majority population. Consequently, it was much more difficult for school districts to identify and plan for children in these cultures.

As many handicapped children were able to perform acceptable and productive roles within their subculture without the benefit of special education programs, they were not perceived as "handicapped" by the members of their particular group. However, as these young people were later integrated into larger segments of society, they often faced seemingly insurmountable barriers.

- Nine state education agencies (50%) reported that economic class differences placed some degree of restriction on rural schools' abilities to fully implement Public Law 94-142. The predominant factor identified was economic class differences regarding values placed upon educating handicapped students. Some local education agencies did not favor expenditures for individuals who they felt would not be productive in the long run. In addition, some economically deprived parents of handicapped youngsters felt they had more immediate concerns than the education of their children.

- Marginal roads were reported by 44% of those reporting as causing serious problems inhibiting the provision of full educational services to handicapped children. In many instances, this factor directly affected itinerant staff more than the children themselves.

- Sixty-one percent of all state education agencies reported that mountainous areas and icy, muddy roads negatively affected full service delivery. This problem resulted in high costs per unit of service, disruption of continuity and long delays in providing assessment and evaluation procedures.

- Fourteen states (79%) reported that long distances between rural schools and special education services was a critical factor in implementing the principles of Public Law 94-142. The problem was often compounded in schools with insufficient numbers of handicapped children to financially justify employing full-time special education staff or consultants.

- Ten state education agencies (55%) reported that low tax bases had some impact on the ability of rural districts to deliver full services.

- Six areas (33%) named migrant employment as an inhibiting factor in the rural school's ability to deliver full services. There is considerable difficulty in tracing migrant children from site to site. Program continuity is a serious problem.

The most frequently mentioned additional areas of difficulty were implementation of Least Restrictive Environment concepts, Individual Education Program development, and ensuring parental involvement and procedural safeguards.

Historically, it has been typical for rural schools to serve mildly handicapped children in regular classrooms. This practice was largely due to a lack of consistent itinerant and resource help. However, programs for moderately and severely handicapped children were not commonly found in rural schools. The traditional pattern has been to place such students in state or regional facilities. Inadequate local services have been a major stumbling block in efforts to return institutionalized children to their local communities.

Implementing Change

Dr. Doris Helge discussed methods of implementing change. She noted that the key to success in meeting the needs of rural special education students is an understanding of the importance of individualized strategies.

The concept of individualization applies to a broad number of variables: Size, funding formulae and geographic terrain are just a few. One community or district may be the same size as another, yet differ markedly. For instance, if a mountain separates parts of a district, this factor alone greatly affects the ability of itinerant personnel to serve the needs of handicapped children.

While the National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project asked those surveyed for problems, it also sought answers. Why did one strategy work well in a particular area and not in another? Answers from this survey have helped establish a computerized Management Information System designed to assist rural education personnel. When the Project receives requests for information, characteristics of the requesting area are matched through a data bank with service delivery recommendations based on data gathered from an area with similar geographic, attitudinal, educational and other attributes. The Project also issues rural strategy abstracts based on comprehensive literature reviews and maintains a National Rural Personnel Needs Data Bank. A National Rural School Newsletter is also disseminated to over 12,000 rural schools and other interested parties.

* * * * *

Dr. James Siantz of the Office of Special Education — formerly the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) — traced the course of federal participation in dealing with special education needs in rural America, and told conference participants of opportunities for future help in this area.

"When the Bureau began its program of aiding special education," said Dr. Siantz, "a great deal of funding went to university programs for training teachers in this field. At the time, there was a basic need for a great many special education teachers across the country. We needed doctoral people to go out into the field and start new programs, and we needed to start undergraduate teachers on their educational careers . . . ."

In the mid-seventies, Dr. Siantz explained, there was a shift toward grants to provide more support personnel and the funding of special projects. Many smaller colleges and universities began to receive additional

help. These institutions were placing their graduates in close proximity to their locations. In such schools, most of the students came from within seventy-five miles of the facility they were attending, and found career opportunities in the same area upon graduation. BEH also participated in more specialized projects involving the inservice area, and began funding rural training projects. Many of these projects concerned training aids such as consulting teacher models, and computer-assisted instruction projects utilizing mobile vans.

After a 1979 Task Force on Rural Special Education, BEH initiated more than one hundred grants relating to rural needs. "Rural Roundtable" conferences were scheduled, and recommendations for future action evolved from these meetings. The White House launched a new "Initiative for Rural America" in which many government agencies participated. Included in this program were representatives from Energy, Agriculture and Labor. As a result of the White House program, individual agencies were charged with developing specific plans of action for impacting change in rural America.

Dr. Siantz encouraged conferees to submit their suggestions for programs that would further efforts in rural communities. "You are the people who are out there doing the job — let us hear from you — there's a fair chance we can work with you, and I welcome your recommendations for fulfilling rural training needs . . . ."

WORK GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

I. Cost-Effective Service Delivery Approaches

Due to a number of variables, including geographic obstacles, the cost of special education programs in rural areas is disproportionately high in relation to urban settings. In the work group session on this topic, conference participants attempted to identify innovative strategies for delivering needed services to mentally retarded and other handicapped students in a cost-efficient manner. Conferees also dealt with approaches for meeting some of the key provisions of Public Law 94-142, such as implementation of the Least Restrictive Environment concept, Individual Education Program development and ensuring parental involvement.

Staff Development and Effective Use of Personnel

Participants felt that one of the keys to cost-effective service delivery in rural areas was maximizing the use of available personnel. Such a strategy is almost a necessity in many small communities and districts, where a few well-trained special education professionals (or perhaps one such person) are responsible for teaching, training, community relations, parental involvement and various other needs. The "ripple effect" was discussed as a method of spreading skills: One well-trained person trains another, and that person in turn trains a third party, etc. Trainees can include regular education teachers, paraprofessionals and members of the community itself. Parents should certainly be included in this latter group. High school

students with educational career goals can be trained and utilized as teacher aides. Additionally, training would include the sharing of knowledge and experience between special education professionals.

Cost-effective service delivery quite naturally entails utilizing "on-hand" programs and personnel. Many members of the school team who could be utilized are frequently ignored. Bus drivers, cafeteria employees, secretaries and other direct contact people can be trained to understand the educational needs of handicapped children. One cost-effective strategy already in use is the development of first aid training classes for all staff members. Red Cross instructors acquaint personnel with both the needs of handicapped children and the steps to take if and when medical problems arise.

Effective staff development is clearly linked to cost-effective service and the implementation of a Least Restrictive Environment. Conference participants expressed concern that lack of such development, and the resulting scarcity of skilled personnel, would set the stage for continuation of more traditional — and more restrictive — educational processes. Recommendations for meeting staff development needs included the use of television for inservice training. Large groups of people can be reached through this medium, at a relatively low cost per person. This method is particularly well suited to the needs of rural areas, as viewers can avoid the time and expense of traveling to distant locations for training. In many cases, people in mountainous terrain or other isolated areas find it nearly impossible to attend inservice training sessions.

Field-based training is an effective means of increasing understanding of rural education needs. Bringing university people **to** the school system to train personnel, rather than asking teachers to come to the university, enhances staff morale and increases their teaching skills where they work. Additionally, this training method helps university personnel keep up to date on field activities, and enables them to present a more realistic picture of rural needs to their students on campus.

The consultant training model was designed specifically for staff development. This method utilizes the "ripple effect." Every teacher who has worked with a consulting teacher shares his or her knowledge with a colleague in the field. This process can also be used with itinerant teachers, who are already in the field in a traveling capacity, and regularly come into contact with teachers in different communities.

Other cost-effective solutions include **consolidation of teaching locations.** For example, children from several districts or areas can be brought to a central location to take part in educational programs presented by teacher specialists.

A proven support strategy is the use of **mobile vans** to provide library materials, audiovisual equipment and other teaching aids for teachers in rural areas.

One suggestion emanati ; from a conference work group session concerned a **time purchase** m thod of utilizing regular classroom teachers. Under this plan, the schoc would "buy" one of the teacher's periods per day, and utilize that per d to integrate exceptional children into the classroom. Children rang ; from r oderately retarded to gifted might be included in such a progra .

For example, a math teacher would devote one period per day to a special education class. Part of the funding set aside for specialized support services would be paid to the teacher, and part would be set aside for an inservice training program that would allow that teacher to proceed toward a special education certification. Thus, regular classroom teachers could help handicapped students, and further their own professional careers. After perhaps three years of such a program, maintenance costs for special education needs might be significantly reduced, as participating regular educators became dually certified in both their original area of expertise and in special education.

Parental and Community Involvement

An understanding of parental feelings is an essential first step toward gaining their cooperation and involvement. Teachers and other professionals in the field of special education must realize that parents undergo a broad spectrum of emotions when they learn that their child may be placed in special classes. There is an initial tendency to refuse to believe their child is handicapped. Often, they feel anger and resentment toward the person who first discusses the matter with them. Special education staff members can aid both the parents and the child by helping parents learn to cope with the reality of handicapping conditions, and gain an awareness of the availability — and benefits — of special education services. Conferees also felt there was a great need for the establishment and continuance of full educational programs designed to acquaint parents with their rights regarding Public Law 94-142.

First, however, special education personnel must gain parental trust — not always an easy task in the rural community. As mentioned earlier in studies compiled through the National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project, there is sometimes an inherent distrust of outsiders and new ideas in rural areas. Staff members must break down these barriers by becoming "insiders" rather than outsiders — by proving that they themselves want to be considered as members of the community. From the beginning, special education personnel must utilize strategies for parental involvement that offer opportunities for mutual trust. Too often, parents in both rural and urban environments tend to view teachers and school ad-

ministrators as adversaries, not partners. Conferees felt that one method of overcoming parental distrust, and easing the "adversarial" role of school personnel, was to schedule meetings on "neutral" ground, rather than in an academic setting. These meetings should be held at times that are conducive to parent involvement.

One work group session suggestion concerned the possibility of asking local area employers to allow parents to attend such meetings as IEP development sessions during normal work hours. A public relations campaign was suggested which would concentrate on the role of industry and the private sector in recognizing the importance of parental involvement in the educational process of their children.

Several methods might be utilized to foster parental involvement in developing Individual Education Programs for their handicapped children. In light of the geographic distances that frequently separate parents and teachers, a telephone conference could save both time and money. In areas with a high isolation factor, it might even be economically practical to buy telephone service for those parents who do not have access to such conveniences.

Television and radio present opportunities for extremely cost-effective strategies regarding involvement. Local area radio programs dealing with parental rights and responsibilities under Public Law 94-142 would reach a large rural audience. Messages coupled with highly popular programs would further assure wide dissemination. Such programs could include weather reports, farm news, grain reports, church news, community news, agricultural shows and bulletins regarding migrant workers. Syndicated programs and forums, as well as syndicated newspaper columns, could be geared to provide information on the rights of parents and students. Question and answer capabilities should be an integral part of such media presentations. Additionally, radio and TV public service spots on pertinent subjects should be provided for distribution to stations serving rural areas.

It was recommended that special education budgets be structured to allow the purchase of newspaper advertising space and the production of posters and brochures for distribution to post offices, feed and grain stores, migrant worker centers, factories, fishing boat ports and other areas recognized as community gathering places tied in with the local economy. Agricultural extension services could also be utilized to disseminate information on Public Law 94-142.

Participants suggested the formation of media lending libraries in rural communities. Filmstrips, projectors and cassettes would be on hand for use by parents. These materials would contain information on Public Law 94-142 and other relevant data.

Public relations campaigns conducted by the Office of Special Education, state and local education agencies and other organizations, could help acquaint parents with information on Public Law 94-142.

Establishing Community Participation

Gaining the confidence of the local area "power structure" is essential to establishing community involvement in the special education needs of handicapped children. Generally, community leaders play a large part in both forming and reflecting the attitudes of their respective areas. They know the needs of their communities, their values and their standards. The special education teacher must fully utilize his or her talents as an organizer, public relations expert and practical psychologist. Human relations skills are absolutely essential. Who really runs the community? How do these persons feel about special education? How are handicapped children viewed within the community? Is community pride and spirit high, or low? Special education personnel must make every effort to answer these questions. There can be little progress in the rural community without a clear sense of purpose and direction. Getting off on the wrong foot may well delay implementation of Public Law 94-142 indefinitely. Good human skills are **highly** cost-effective . . .

There are a number of individuals and organizations within the rural community who can help create positive attitudes toward special education. Social clubs are extremely important to local area residents. Often, such groups comprise nearly the entire social structure of the community. Church groups, in most areas, are essential contacts.

Staff personnel should definitely take advantage of those persons who have already established relationships in the community. Among those who would very likely be helpful are public health personnel, Sunday school teachers, ministers, physicians and agricultural specialists.

Cost-Effective Communications

Conferees viewed educational communication facilities as highly cost-effective in acquainting rural communities with special education needs. A few of the strategies mentioned concerned access to educational programming through communications satellites, closed circuit TV, cable TV, regular channel TV, cassette tapes and Citizen Band (CB) radio. CB radio has been used most effectively in rural areas. The low cost of this equipment means that nearly every small community can afford to form at least a minimal communications network. CB radios open the door to a number of possibilities. For example, in isolated mountainous school districts, parents and teachers can gain help or advice from outside areas on a particular problem, then follow through on that advice at home and in the classroom. The CB "network" is also cost-effective in warning itinerant special education personnel of changes in schedule. If a child was

scheduled to be tested and failed to show up at a particular point, a CB message could save personnel perhaps a hundred-mile drive.

Participants felt there was a pressing need for the development of a comprehensive national telecommunications system, incorporating multimedia technology. They noted that some of the basic requirements of such a system would include a multi-service "privacy protected" telecommunications system.

Cost-Effective Energy and Transportation Strategies

Conferees pointed out that the "time and distance" factors common to so many rural areas called for sound energy and transportation practices. It was suggested that consideration be given to changing school boundaries if a comprehensive needs assessment study warranted such steps. Reapportioning districts might bring students and facilities closer together and make it easier for itinerant personnel to better serve handicapped children.

Parental to-and-from work routes should also be examined as possible transportation resources for both children and itinerant special education personnel. It was also suggested that communities consider contacting the U.S. Department of Transportation, which has allocated funds for van pooling in rural areas.

Longer school days and shorter work weeks could serve as cost-effective strategies relating to both energy and transportation needs. However, participants noted that what might be cost-effective in one area might not be in another. The number of pupils involved is important in these considerations, due to a divergence of geographic and isolation factors across the country. In certain areas of Texas, for instance, a district serving three thousand children is considered cost-effective. In some Wyoming and Montana districts, there are often only ten children in one school. In such a district, ten students may well be the maximum number for cost-effective service.

Another strategy mentioned was changing the school calendar to save energy and transportation costs. For example, schools could close in certain areas during the worst months of winter. Students could be served during this time by televised instruction sessions. This strategy has already been utilized on a "crisis" basis — conferees felt it would be advantageous to institute this type of plan in advance.

Cooperative busing and the elimination of some bus routes, teacher car pooling, staggered school days, insulation of old educational facilities and the use of diesel engines in areas where this fuel is in good supply were other suggestions.

Rural communities near airports should look into the possibility of utilizing local pilots to transport itinerant personnel and to take children to and from service delivery areas. Many of these private pilots need to log flight hours to maintain their flying status. Some could be persuaded to gain their ratings aiding the educational needs of handicapped children.

Finally, it was noted that "nearly every experience can be turned into a learning opportunity." Thus, long bus rides to and from school could be used to learn about local area history, geography and wildlife.

Cost-Effective "Child Find" Strategies

The extensive, time-consuming nature of "child find" programs is compounded in rural areas by the factors of geographic isolation or sparse populations — plus the reluctance on the part of some communities to identify handicapped children. Conference participants felt this was an important issue, and suggested a number of strategies for use in rural communities.

Hiring of neighborhood paraprofessionals for "child find" tasks has been a successful strategy in some rural areas. This program is beneficial in two ways. Personnel selected are "model" parents themselves, and thus concerned about the needs of handicapped children. In addition, they live in the community and have common cultural backgrounds with their neighbors. Such personnel are trained to teach "readiness skills" to children in their own homes. Later, paraprofessionals team with professionals to develop prescriptive programs for the children concerned. They also work with parents, daycare center staff and parent substitutes such as babysitters and relatives.

Several areas have instituted successful "child find" strategies. A few include:

- A Utah program produced a publication titled **37,001 Reasons to Read This Document.** The title referred to the number of handicapped children identified in that state, and proved useful in familiarizing citizens with pressing program needs.
- In Maine, representatives from several agencies are present at kindergarten screening sessions. These sessions are major "child find" vehicles in that state.
- Well-baby clinics are "child find" mechanisms in Maryland. Early screening and periodic follow-up sessions are carried out by the health departments in Vermont.

- A door-to-door census is helpful in finding handicapped children. Such a census can be combined with an official community census or operated separately.
- Town clerks, postmasters, meter readers and telephone personnel are just a few of the people who can help identify handicapped children. Anyone who goes in rural homes, or has regular and trusted contact with these homes, is a useful resource person.
- "Child find" announcements in utility bills have proved helpful.
- Toll free numbers, TV and radio spots, church bulletins and newspaper stories can be utilized in "child find" programs.

Many cooperatives have carried out successful "child find" efforts. Local education agency (LEA) cooperatives have pooled their resources on a voluntary basis to help solve problems such as long distances between clients and services. Sometimes sub-cooperatives are formed within the larger groups to meet divergent needs peculiar to a particular area. For example, a residential center might become a sub-cooperative within a local education agency. Health departments can be utilized by cooperatives to provide handicapped children with interdisciplinary services.

Many current lawsuits concerning "child find" efforts reflect a number of different viewpoints. Some involve parents who refuse to refer their children or give permission for testing. Others entail school superintendents who are reluctant to "find" handicapped children because they feel services for these children will create additional expenses.

Conferees urged special education professionals to be both "thoughtful and aggressive" concerning legal action related to "child find" programs — thoughtful in the sense that other avenues should be explored first, and aggressive when it is determined that no other path is possible.

Certainly a community's value system has a great deal to do with the success or failure of "child find" efforts. While some rural communities become involved and cooperative, others take the attitude embodied in such statements as "What are you bothering with **these** children for?" To a large degree, the success or failure of a particular program depends upon the groundwork established by special education professionals and advocates **prior** to "child find" efforts. Good community contact, the establishment of mutual trust and a sound public information program concerning the rights and responsibilities of both service providers and service recipients are essential to accomplishing worthwhile goals.

Diagnostic Costs

Participants noted that high diagnostic costs are causing extensive delays in completing evaluations. Such barriers, in turn, cause delays in placement.

Even with community cooperation, child assessment is a costly, time-consuming effort. Some states have found that hiring a psychologist to undertake assessments for all districts is a more cost-efficient measure than hiring such persons on an "off and on" consultation basis. A psychologist retained on an overall project contract can follow through on the educational program after assessments are completed.

Conferees felt that cost-effective measures in the area of testing might include greater efforts to assess testing needs, the establishment of cooperative testing among districts and interagency cooperative agreements.

Individualized Education Programs

Conferees felt that IEPs should be planned on a life-long basis and should link special education and vocational education needs. It was also noted that a major consideration in formulating IEPs is the cost to local education agencies. Cost-effective measures in this area are directly related to the proficiency of those persons writing IEPs. Properly trained in-service personnel should be utilized in this task, to assure that funds are committed realistically. To further assure the preparation of cost-effective IEPs, the reduction of duplicated efforts and the facilitation of centralized planning procedures, agencies concerned with the implementation of IEPs might consider joint efforts that would commit a portion of their time and personnel toward a common goal.

It was also suggested that there is a great need for IEPs designed for individual teachers. Personnel at the university level should begin writing IEPs for individuals participating in both preservice and inservice activities. Hopefully, such IEPs would lead to appropriate degrees, or the attainment of other professional goals.

Management Information Systems

Management information systems have successfully served a number of rural areas in a cost-efficient manner. These systems can be operated on either a "hand sorted" or heavily computerized basis — depending upon the individual district's resources and needs. Data banks — or files — in this type of system include all resources available to the school, including

facilities, materials, media, personnel skills, etc. The system keeps an up-to-date listing of resource personnel such as retired certified teachers and other individuals capable of performing substitute duties. Wherever possible parents, volunteers and other possible participants should be included in the data bank. A broad cross reference of area residents will enable special education personnel to locate people not ordinarily considered as resources. For example, mildly handicapped, severely handicapped and non-handicapped children could all benefit from career familiarization experiences which relate school work with the real world around them. A lobsterman, farmer or industrial worker from the community could show students what he does for a living and explain how subjects such as arithmetic are used on the job. These persons might bring the tools of their trade to class and help train students in jobs common to the area.

Early Intervention

Conference participants felt that rural communities should consider early intervention procedures with handicapped and high risk infants and young children as a high priority, cost-effective strategy. Initial high cost items such as media usage, telecommunications technology, personnel selection and training pay for themselves in the long run by influencing a large number of people at a relatively low cost per individual.

WORK GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

II. Personnel Retention and Recruitment

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff and providing appropriate inservice training on a continuing basis are among the greatest barriers to ensuring full, appropriate services to handicapped rural students. In this work group session, conference participants focused on creative approaches to dealing with these problems. They considered such issues as coping with "staff burnout," techniques for reducing stress and effective use of inservice training. In addition to the problems of special education teachers, they studied strategies for recruiting, retaining and training support staff and regular classroom teachers who will become involved with handicapped students.

As mentioned earlier, 94% of the states surveyed by the National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project reported problems in recruiting and retaining special education personnel in rural areas. Clearly, a figure such as this points to a problem that could have a devastating effect on the educational needs of handicapped children.

What are the basic problem areas in the recruitment and retention of such personnel? Conference participants pointed to several major factors, including isolation, cultural differences leading to feelings of detachment, social deprivation, lack of local support, poor housing, poor pay and the need for extensive travel. These and other factors lead to stress, an increased lack of self-confidence and ultimate "teacher burnout."

Effective Strategies

Some educational agencies have created strategies that recognize staff retention problems and attempt to deal with them **before** new personnel become involved in rural assignments. They inform teachers that when they are hired they will only be expected to work at their post two years. They will then be transfered out of the rural area for a year, and, if they choose, they may return to a rural assignment after that period. Such arrangements, of course, require cooperation between rural and urban school districts.

A very effective program includes "down to earth" dialogue between school district personnel and prospective teachers, focusing on the prospect's ability to adapt to a new cultural environment. "Can you identify with local values? What's important to you socially, culturally, personally? How much are you willing to change, or at least accept? We are asking you to come into a very traditional rural community. Are you willing to learn, from us, why we value those traditions? Are you willing to withhold your judgment until you have had time to learn what needs to be changed, and what doesn't?"

Some of the more remote districts in the country have also included topics in these sessions relating to self-sufficiency — questions designed to test a prospective teacher's "burnout potential." "What are your hobbies? Do you like to read? Can you entertain yourself over long periods of social isolation?" These questions have real meaning for persons bound for such places as Alaska, with its season of short days, long nights and blizzard conditions. Certainly, it is far better — and more cost effective — for prospects to understand what lies before them, and decide whether or not rural life is for them. Quite frequently this process helps discover people who view conditions in such areas as **positive** employment factors very much in line with their lifestyles. Matching interests with employment opportunities should be a key factor in recruiting special education personnel. Obviously, people who spend their free time backpacking or studying nature will be happier in a rural area than a person who has no interest whatever in the "great outdoors."

Some areas have successfully used "pairing" techniques to help newcomers adjust to rural communities. "Oldtimers" in the area are paired with personnel new to the community — it is their job to show their charge some of the history, tradition and culture of the community — to underscore the positive aspects of a different lifestyle and give the newcomer a "shortcut to understanding."

This is a most valuable technique in a rural area where newcomers are not accepted until they have been in the community at least two or three years. An additional advantage to teaming with a person who has lived in the area for perhaps twenty years is that the newcomer feels he or she is on

a peer level with at least one person in the community. This is an opportunity for immediate social interaction. And, at the same time, residents will begin to feel the newcomer is less alien because "one of their own" has taken him in.

An extremely effective supportive technique for rural personnel is the stress reduction workshop. Inherent in a good stress reduction program is a master plan designed to thoroughly assess the nature and cause of an individual's problem. What are the particular stress factors involved? What causes them? What is functional about these stresses, and what is dysfunctional? What attitudes, outlooks and conditions must be changed to relieve this stress? The program then concentrates on a series of exercises ranging from venting, physical activity, making plans for individual stress reduction measures and increased social opportunities — plus other actions designed to alleviate this problem.

Stress reduction workshops and other techniques for retaining personnel try to help people clarify their individual problems. The nature of teaching in a rural area often twists positive aspects of the community into negatives for the person concerned. Teachers know everyone in the community — and everyone knows them. There is no anonymity. A person is a teacher in school, a teacher at the grocery store — a teacher twenty-four hours a day. A teacher is expected to "dress and act like a teacher."

The positive side of this coin is that professional recognition also brings community respect. When a teacher brings about positive change in the school system, and helps both parents and their children, he brings about behavioral and attitudinal change in the community. In other words, through his actions, and his continued presence, he changes the way he is perceived.

Incentive Strategies

Conferees suggested a broad range of incentives designed to increase teacher satisfaction in rural areas and help alleviate long-term stress situations. Among topics discussed were leave with pay and longer holidays. Loans and benefits might be offered to special education students in training, with the stipulation that they would agree to a certain period of employment in a rural area.

Local education agencies might take a new look at a discretionary leave plan which substitutes discretionary days for sick days and gives the teacher a better feeling of control over how that time is spent. An improved sabbatical plan for teachers in rural areas was also discussed. And, conferees noted that assigning husband and wife teams to rural areas would help reduce both sociological and psychological stress.

Incremental incentives might include contractual provisions for greater pay increases for longer periods of service. Subsidized interest rates would enable special education personnel to more easily purchase a home in the community, and thus gain a greater sense of belonging — in their eyes and in the eyes of the community itself. State and local education agencies might take a closer look at proven industry incentive programs designed to place and retain personnel in rural areas.

Professional and Community Support

How can teachers gain the support they need from their peers in both the community and the teaching profession? One successful model uses video tapes to expose teachers to positive role models. After viewing such presentations, and discussing their own problems and needs, many teachers have been able to return to classrooms where they formerly felt insecure. Such experiences serve to reinforce an individual's self-confidence and encourage him to take on additional educational and community tasks.

Clearly, the way a teacher feels about his or her job performance has a great deal of impact on that person's self-confidence and degree of career satisfaction. Such techniques as teacher informational hot lines, technical assistance from universities, teacher exchange programs, inservice training and staff development plans, and the coordination of university and secondary school activities and training lend a great deal of support to the rural special education teacher.

Teacher exchange programs have proven effective in reducing stress and increasing professional knowledge. Special education teachers who work in the regular classroom a part of the day gain relief from their regular duties, learn to work in another field and return to their old jobs refreshed.

Teacher exchange on a more prolonged basis has also proven effective. In this model, a teacher works perhaps a semester, or a year, in the regular classroom setting before returning to his or her special field.

Another "relief from routine" procedure is the technique of providing cyclical experiences **within** a person's job structure. For instance, special education teachers who work with one of the school's clubs or athletic teams are stimulated by participation in a new activity and gain the feeling that they are a real part of the overall school environment.

This latter point was viewed by conferees as a vital factor in retaining personnel in rural areas. Often the special education teacher feels he or she is an outsider, even within the school system itself. School administrators can help alleviate this situation by involving the teacher in school activities, faculty planning sessions and other aspects of the

educational environment. Like everyone else, teachers need a sense of personal importance — they need to know they are valued, recognized members of the team.

Teachers who work outside their regular jobs as professional members of special service groups aid the community and enhance their feelings of self-worth. For example, a special education teacher would be a valuable member of a team comprising educational, legal and medical personnel working toward the implementation of various aspects of Public Law 94-142.

Special education teachers **need** to know they are a part of the school environment. As one teacher participant stated: "A lot of us in this field are concerned solely with output — we'd like the chance to contribute a little **in**put!"

Everyone likes to be asked for their opinion. Even if a person's advice may not always be followed, the fact that it was considered is significant to that individual. Conferees discussed a number of strategies for including staff personnel in planning, determining inservice goals, staff development and student evaluative activities. It was suggested that funding be sought for planning grants that utilized teachers' opinions on specific issues relating to teachers' needs. These opinions would then be considered in the overall planning of future developments.

Inservice Training and Staff Development

Conferees felt that special education inservice training models should be more responsive to rural teacher needs. They noted that such models should be closely integrated with university preservice models that would both reinforce — and anticipate — field experience. Participants suggested that those university and inservice models that have proven effective be widely disseminated.

Inservice training emphasizing community human relations skills would prove most valuable to staff members in rural areas. Such models would include identification of problem areas and sound techniques for solving those problems.

Inservice and staff development programs should be carried out on a continuous, progressive basis. Programs should include regular follow-up procedures such as formal and informal task assignments which apply knowledge gained through training. These assignments might range from problem solving tasks to participation in discussion groups.

Participants felt it was most important to coordinate university and field activities. Such contact enhances faculty development in both university and on-the-job settings, provides expertise to rural teachers and furnishes university faculty members and their preservice students with valuable

first-hand experience. Universities that have "taken their faculties into the field" and designed courses based on local teacher needs have found their efforts well worthwhile.

As a general rule, ten percent of a rural area's teachers, administrators and school board personnel can be termed as "go getters" — enthusiastic, ambitious people who will grow and progress on their own, without outside stimulation. Many of these people will eventually move on to other positions, but they will "make things happen" while they are there. Approximately eighty percent of a school's personnel will "go with the system." They will neither help, nor hinder.

It is the final ten percent that present significant barriers to progress. If these persons cannot be convinced to become positively involved, some experienced teachers suggest that it is far wiser to spend less time trying to convert them and more time making sure they don't keep **others** from taking an interest in special education needs.

Conferees stressed the importance of providing workshops or other arenas designed to increase understanding between teachers, parents, students and members of the community. The more local citizens become involved with the educational system, the more contact they have with teachers within that system. Familiarity leads to understanding . . . understanding leads to support . . . and support leads to teacher self-confidence and a greater chance of extended tenure within the system.

Teacher Retraining and Educational Options

Conference participants felt there was a need for a concentrated effort at the national level to retrain regular teachers in the skills they need to teach — and understand — handicapped children. Such programs should entail changes in the design of preservice curricula, and should include a wide range of other educational options such as campus extension courses, teacher-defined courses and inservice training.

Recruiting Personnel for Rural Areas

Many rural school districts are in desperate need of teachers. Others, however, have learned to turn so-called negatives into positives to attract the "cream of the crop" from working professionals and new graduates. Some districts have contacted universities with requests for "your top three graduates in speech therapy." They have made it clear that they will take nothing but the best. Applicants are flattered by such attention and

feel that school officials who would go to such lengths to get them will very likely support them in their jobs. Districts that have tried such tactics have gotten good, reliable people to come to their areas to work.

Other districts have stressed the competitive approach on a broader basis. One advertises in New York papers for personnel, emphasizing the fact that they are very selective and that they will not allow a teacher to stay in the job more than two years. They state that they have ten students in their school and that these students will attend classes together throughout their educational years. Therefore, the administration feels that imposing a two-year maximum tenure on teachers will help gain one of the district's major objectives: the introduction of cultural diversity into the classroom. The advertisement also stresses rural area advantages such as no pollution and no traffic problems. The position, they say, is a golden opportunity to gain a unique experience — the taste of a new lifestyle. This particular ten-student district gets ten thousand applications for positions — while others scramble for whatever personnel they can get!

Many rural districts have turned isolation into a positive factor, by emphasizing the very features that some persons view as undesirable. Conferees noted the obvious merits of such "Peace Corps" models and suggested increased study of methods that would attract personnel through this approach. It was also suggested that this model be studied in relation to the "teacher corps" model. They noted that some updating is called for within the current teacher corps model — teacher availability has changed considerably, and the former goals of this model should be studied in light of current needs.

Some people are attracted to rural areas by the lure of new experience and the chance to live in natural surroundings. Still, participants felt that rural districts should also concentrate on attracting people who are **already** familiar with the community. It was suggested that beginning special education teachers with local or area backgrounds might be convinced to stay in rural districts if they were offered financial incentives and good inservice programs. To further serve the area's needs, administrators might consider "open door" policies in relation to such inservice programs, so that teachers from surrounding counties could take advantage of training opportunities.

Paraprofessionals should also be recruited in rural area communities. There are many people who have the time to work in such positions, if the opportunities for part-time work were available. For example, there are rural households where only one spouse is working — possibly because there are no jobs available in the community. In addition, there are retired teachers who would like the chance to become active in the field again, and earn extra income. With some training, and perhaps enrollment in continuing education courses, these persons could be provided with mean-

ingful job opportunities — and, at the same time, give special education teachers some needed release time.

Conferees pointed out that it was time to "sell" special education in a more positive manner. This branch of the teaching profession has sometimes suffered from a "low prestige" image. It is time that this image was reversed. Special education teachers receive extensive training in a responsible, vitally important field — a field that is particularly important to the parents of handicapped children. Efforts should be furthered to involve these parents in the enlistment of people who will be greatly responsible for shaping the futures of their children.

The merits of a special education career in the rural community should be presented to preservice personnel early — in their freshman and sophomore years. Teachers who have been motivated to choose special education careers in rural areas should be enlisted to share their thoughts and experiences with prospective teachers.

Conferees pointed out the need for greater exposure of career opportunities in rural areas. They suggested the formation of a national registry that would do more than merely list qualified applicants and available jobs. They envisioned a clearinghouse that would take a close look at the qualifications, needs and lifestyles of people seeking careers, and the cultural values, traditions and attitudes of the communities concerned. The registry's value would lie in its ability to match the right people with the right jobs. With the data now available on rural community needs, and the needs of special education teachers, it is quite likely that many of the current problems of recruitment and retention could be alleviated.

WORK GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

III. Capitalizing on Positive Rural Attributes and Attitudes

Some attitudes prevalent in rural America are barriers to the provision of appropriate special education programs. However, there are a number of positive attitudes and attributes which can be capitalized on in efforts to implement Public Law 94-142. For example, the concept of "community spirit" may still be found in rural areas, where people sincerely care about one another and are usually willing to do whatever they can to help others who are in need. In addition, rural school districts typically lack the bureaucratic barriers to service often prevalent in urban schools. Conferees in this work group session dealt with steps that could be taken to capitalize on these and other inherent rural resources, such as close ties between home and community, the interest of many residents in their schools and the responsiveness of political leaders to familiar citizens. Participants considered a broad range of possibilities and resources, including the public media, civic and religious groups, families and senior citizens.

There is much to be said for life in a rural community. Many people feel that this segment of society offers an image of traditional American values that have, to a great extent, been lost in our urban areas. While there is clearly a great deal of truth in this picture, rural America is no "pastoral paradise." There are problems of poverty and illiteracy. There are rural areas where people receive low pay for long hours of work — or have no work at all. There are places where few medical or educational facilities are provided.

In some cases, federal and state authorities have done much to alleviate these conditions. In others, problems have been shamefully ignored. Sometimes, provincial attitudes prevalent in the community itself have slowed down or stifled outside attempts to help. And, more than once, outside efforts have failed because the agencies concerned have refused to understand the pride, cultural values and traditions of the rural community in question.

Many of the so-called negative aspects of rural life become very positive qualities when viewed from the proper perspective. While there is a certain amount of provincialism in nearly all small communities, that provincialism frequently acts as a safeguard against the erosion of traditions and values cherished by area residents. It is also an effective barrier against the intrusion of those values and lifestyles the community finds undesirable.

The closed, protective nature of the rural community has distinct advantages for its citizens and for educational personnel working there. The teacher in a rural community is viewed as a person, instead of a number. And, as rural people traditionally take care of their own, the teacher who gains acceptance in the community becomes a part of that caring.

There are many obvious advantages to the rural lifestyle: a lower cost of living, a lower crime rate, a generally pollution-free environment, greater recreational opportunities, the chance to pursue outdoor hobbies, the opportunity to study community heritages, a lack of urban pressures and the chance to learn alternate patterns of living.

The teacher will also find professional advantages in the rural community. Working in a small school enables the teacher to work more closely with his or her pupils — and the parents of those pupils. Teachers in small communities **do** have a higher degree of status and respect. The school is a very important institution in the rural community; people perceive their schools as belonging to **them**, not to some vague, administrative entity. Thus, they are concerned with what happens to their schools — and to their teachers.

While it is not always easy to bring about change in the rural educational system, it is a **great deal** easier to identify and work with the people at a decision-making level. When changes are made, they generally take place on a more informal basis, without excess bureaucratic involvement. Many potential problems can be solved or avoided in rural communities before they reach the conflict or confrontation stage.

The teacher's role is in many ways far less structured in the rural community. Generally, a teacher personally knows the people to whom he is accountable, and this accountability is likely to take place on a less than formal basis. Teachers, administrators, school board members, parents and local leaders and decision-makers are also neighbors in the rural community.

Working with Parents and Children in the Rural Community

In rural areas, there is a strong tendency to view children as individuals. People also see other people's children as extensions of their own family. Thus, there is generally a greater tolerance for handicapped children in the rural community — a fact that has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the handicapped child is recognized as a human being rather than a statistic. He is not merely a "mentally retarded child," he is "the Johnson's oldest boy who is mentally retarded." There are often more meaningful tasks available to handicapped children in rural areas — tasks that might be unavailable, or have little meaning, in an urban community. Even if there are no local employment opportunities, there are generally family-oriented jobs that need to be done — and are appreciated.

Teachers in rural areas will usually experience a more comfortable teacher-student ratio — one that avoids the "assembly line" situation so often encountered in urban schools. This ratio is particularly important in teaching handicapped children, where individual problems demand personal attention.

On the other side of the coin, there is sometimes a tendency on the part of the rural community to place less emphasis on the importance of handicapping conditions and the need to provide services for handicapped individuals. "He's just another member of the family." "She's always been like that and she gets along fine." Acceptance and understanding do not always lead to enthusiastic support for services — or implementation of the principles of Public Law 94-142. One of the major tasks of the rural special education teacher — whether or not that task is outlined in his job description — is a continuous effort to educate the community to the fact that its handicapped children **can** lead fuller, richer lives through educational intervention.

Changing Public Opinion

Earlier it was mentioned that it is usually easier to reach the decision-makers in a small community. That statement also applies to the media. It is most important to meet and get to know media personnel in rural communities — to involve such persons in furthering the needs of handicapped children. Local newspaper editors or radio station personnel should be shown how better services will enhance the lifestyles of these children. The small size of the rural community gives advocates of the handicapped a head start in changing public opinion. It is much easier to make problems and needs visible to **all** segments of the community and to continually reinforce positive messages.

The media can be most helpful in a number of areas concerning implementation of Public Law 94-142. The fact that rural people **know** each other means that public information items regarding such projects as "child find" will very quickly reach a large portion of the population.

Educators should use community facilities as gathering points for information sessions and special education-related activities. Using such facilities implies a compatibility with community values and needs. Such meetings offer the chance to gain the trust of the community, disseminate new data and informally poll the attitudes of local residents. It is also a good idea to involve other human service agencies in special education activities. Help and understanding from all quarters is useful in implementing services. Special education personnel will usually find that increased interagency cooperation is another positive aspect of the rural community.

- A coalition of advocacy groups, with parent participation, is also easier to accomplish in small communities . . .
- Teachers, other school personnel and parents should be encouraged to join community group activities such as sponsored athletic events. Social groups should be asked to sponsor Special Olympics teams, Scout troops and other activities geared to the needs of handicapped children . . .
- Senior citizens can be encouraged to take part in working with handicapped students . . .
- Local charitable groups should be invited to provide projects for special education classes . . .
- A variety of strategies can be initiated to involve parents of handicapped children in an **active** role in the education of their offspring. For example, when these parents become school board members, educational personnel generally have much less trouble implementing change and providing needed services . . .

All of these strategies can serve to inform the public, change their opinions regarding special education — and **reinforce** those opinions in a positive manner. Educators should seek to **create** opportunities for parents, community leaders and school personnel to get together in activities that lead to better understanding. And, the **accomplishments** of such groups should be utilized to build stronger, even more positive relationships.

POST-CONFERENCE GOALS

Participants at the Baltimore Conference felt that while significant progress was being made in some areas of rural special education, there were a great many problems that demanded immediate attention. They suggested consideration of a national coalition specifically organized to portray a more positive image of special education in general, and special education in rural areas in particular. Participants in such a coalition should include organizations, groups and federal and state agencies concerned with the educational needs of handicapped children.

Formation of a rural education network might be one method of gaining recognition on a national basis. The purpose of this network would be to encourage school administrators, boards of education and other policy-making bodies to recognize — and understand — the unique position of special education in the community.

The Baltimore Conference laid the groundwork for focusing increased attention on handicapped children in rural areas. There are answers to the problems of special education in small communities. Many dedicated professionals, parents and citizen volunteers are bringing those answers to bear on a variety of issues. However, full implementation of the principles of Public Law 94-142 will not be realized without the total support of national, state and local decision-makers. One of the major tasks of concerned individuals and organizations is to convince those decision-makers — and the people they represent in the community — that handicapped children can lead richer, better lives through sound educational intervention.

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