

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 127

EC 304 413

AUTHOR Gonzalez, Patricia  
 TITLE Factors That Influence Teacher Attrition.  
 INSTITUTION National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Alexandria, VA.  
 SPONS AGENCY Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.  
 PUB DATE Aug 95  
 CONTRACT H029V30001  
 NOTE 9p.  
 AVAILABLE FROM National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc., 1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 320, King Street Station 1, Alexandria, VA 22314 (\$5.95).  
 PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)  
 JOURNAL CIT NSTEP Information Brief; nl 1995

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Influences; \*Job Satisfaction; \*Labor Turnover; \*Occupational Mobility; Occupational Therapists; Physical Therapists; Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; School Psychologists; \*Special Education Teachers; Speech Therapy; Teacher Background; Teacher Characteristics; \*Teacher Persistence; Teaching Conditions; Therapists; Urban Schools; Work Environment

ABSTRACT

External, employment, and personal factors which influence teacher decisions to stay, leave, or transfer from teaching assignments are discussed, with emphasis on special education teachers. Factors attributed to teacher attrition in urban and rural environments also are briefly reviewed, along with attrition of related services professionals. External factors affecting teachers include economic trends, societal factors such as changing birth rates, and institutional factors. Employment-related variables include professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards, and commitment. Personal factors encompass demographic, family, and cognitive/affective variables. The following aspects of district or school environments have been found to be associated with teacher attrition: lack of administrative support, lack of collegial and parent support, and insufficient involvement in decision-making. Factors linked to job dissatisfaction among related service professionals (including speech/language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, and school psychologists) in school settings include salary, inadequate work and/or office space, inadequate equipment or materials, excessive caseloads, limited staff development, and isolation from colleagues. (Contains 17 references.) (SW)

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
 \* from the original document. \*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

ED 389 127

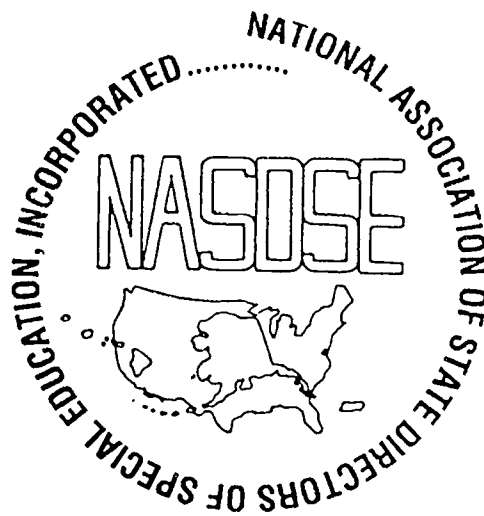
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OEI position or policy.

# NSTEP INFORMATION BRIEF (#1-95)

## *Factors That Influence Teacher Attrition*

*By Patricia Gonzalez, Ph.D.  
Networking System for Training Education Personnel*



August, 1995

EC 304413

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The staff of the Networking System for Training Education Personnel (NSTEP) would like to extend their sincere appreciation to the following individuals for their review of an earlier draft of this report:

Bonnie S. Billingsley, Ed.D.  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute  
Blacksburg, VA

Leslie Jackson, MEd, OTR  
The American Occupational Therapy  
Association, Inc.  
Bethesda, Maryland

Ed McCaul, Ed.D.  
National Clearinghouse for Professions  
in Special Education, NASDSE Subcontract  
Alexandria, VA

*This work was supported in whole or in part by the U.S. Department of Education (Cooperative Agreement No. H029V30001). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the Department should be inferred.*

# NSTEP INFORMATION BRIEF (#1-95)

## *Factors That Influence Teacher Attrition*

### Introduction

The *Sixteenth Annual Report to Congress* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) noted that, despite annual increases in the number of special education teachers, states reported in 1991-92 needing 27,282 additional FTE teachers to fill funded vacancies and to replace teachers who were not adequately trained. This figure marks a 1.3 percent increase in the number of teachers needed in 1990-91. While there are a number of contributing factors to special education teacher supply/demand imbalances<sup>1</sup>, one cause is attrition.

Billingsley (1993) described two types of attrition. *Transfer attrition* includes those teachers who transfer to other special education positions within or outside a particular school or district, as well as those who transfer to general education either in the same or a different school or district. In the former case, the transfer represents a loss to the school or district, but not to the field of special education. Conversely, *exit attrition* connotes a separation from teaching, such as non-teaching employment, retirement, returning to school, or non-teaching employment in schools (e.g., counseling or administration).

Teacher attrition rates reported in national and state studies have varied widely (Billingsley, 1993); however, attrition in special education has been found to be consistently higher than in general education. The term, *retention*, refers to "stayers"--teachers who remain in the same teaching assignment, in the same school as in the previous year. While the terms defined here are commonly used, numerous definitions can be found in the literature on attrition and retention--a fact that complicates comparison of attrition rates and other findings across studies.

The purposes of this report are to identify some of the factors found in research to be associated with teacher attrition (with an emphasis, where possible, on special education teachers). Factors attributed to teacher attrition in urban and rural environments also will be briefly reviewed, as will the attrition literature for related services professionals. Strategies that promote the retention of special education personnel will be addressed in a future *Information Brief* from the Networking System for Training Education Personnel.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Smith-Davis & Billingsley (1993) or Smith-Davis (1992) for a discussion of issues.

## Factors That Contribute to Attrition

Factors associated with attrition will be discussed here using the model introduced by Billingsley (1993). She suggests that teachers' career decisions (i.e., to stay, transfer, or exit) are influenced by *external*, *employment*, and *personal* factors.

### *External Factors Related to Attrition*

*External* factors include societal, economic, and institutional variables that are external to the teacher and the employing school district. Many of these variables are not easily amenable to intervention. Examples of external factors include (a) economic trends (e.g., recessions, labor market trends); (b) societal factors (e.g., changing birth rates, regional population shifts); and (c) institutional factors (e.g., particularly strong preservice programs that instill a high degree of commitment, the successes/failures of teacher union objectives, regulations promulgated by federal/state agencies). Although little research has been conducted on the impact of external factors on career decisions, they obviously could influence the employment or personal circumstances that affect teacher attrition and retention (Billingsley, 1993; Brownell & Smith, 1993).

### *Employment Factors Related to Attrition*

A second aspect of Billingsley's model incorporates four major employment factors that have both direct and indirect effects on career choice: *professional qualifications*, *work conditions*, *work rewards*, and *commitment*. Work-related variables have been shown to be predictors of commitment and job satisfaction which, in turn, are associated with retention (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1994).

Few attrition or retention studies involving special education teachers have looked at *professional qualifications*; consequently, most of the factors cited are associated with general educators (Billingsley, 1993). One factor positively associated with **retention** in some studies is strong preparation programs (as indicated by "satisfaction" ratings of graduates). Prior work experience also supports teacher retention (i.e., more experienced special education teachers are less likely to leave [Singer, 1993a], and in cases where they do leave, more likely to return to teaching at a later date [Singer, 1993b]). Research has shown a positive relationship between initial employment experiences and teacher retention (Billingsley, 1993). Beginning teachers encounter similar problems, including discipline concerns, parent difficulties, and inadequate or insufficient materials. These are shared by special educators in addition to collaboration needs, mastery of IEP requirements, and supervision of paraprofessionals. In recognition of the difficulties faced by beginning teachers, 34 states have implemented programs to meet these needs (Furtwengler, 1995). Other retention factors within the category of *professional qualifications* include certification in the area taught and **lower** scores on the National Teacher Exam and/or the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

Considerably more information via the research literature is available concerning attrition factors related to *work conditions*. Work conditions, including job rewards, are variables that interact to influence job satisfaction, and ultimately, the decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession. For example, unsupportive work environments or problems with work assignments lead to feelings of stress or burnout among special educators (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

The following aspects of district or school environments have been found to be associated with teacher attrition (Billingsley, 1993): (a) lack of administrative support (identified by former teachers in both general and special education); (b) lack of collegial and parent support (the research results for special education teachers are mixed); and (c) insufficient involvement in decision making (may be more of a factor for certain personality types).

District and school factors directly or indirectly affect work assignments, which in turn have been shown to influence job satisfaction and career decisions. Attrition factors cited in the literature under the general category of "work assignments" encompass:

- teaching at the secondary level (elementary teachers stay longer, [Singer, 1993a])
- teachers working with students with emotional problems, speech/language, or vision impairments (Singer, 1993a)
- student discipline problems and lack of progress (Billingsley & Cross, 1991)
- role overload, conflict or ambiguity (research with special educators is just beginning [see Brownell & Smith, 1993])
- excessive paperwork or meetings (cited most often in studies with special educators)
- large class sizes or caseloads

*Work rewards* constitutes another employment factor affecting attrition. Intrinsic rewards such as positive experiences with students, and recognition and appreciation from colleagues, parents, and principals play a key role in increased job satisfaction. External, or monetary rewards, also are important and low salaries have been cited as a reason for attrition (e.g., Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1988). Of course, rewards are highly individualized and greatly influenced by personality factors.

*Commitment* is the fourth employment factor in Billingsley's (1993) model of influences on teacher career decisions. This factor not only influences retention, but the quality of performance as well. Research suggests that the higher the commitment, the higher the likelihood that an individual will remain in teaching. Commitment is an outgrowth of other factors in this model including professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards and personal factors.

### ***Personal Factors Related to Attrition***

Personal factors make up the final component in the model and encompass demographic, family, and cognitive/affective variables. Among *demographic* variables, the age of the teacher is the

most consistent correlate of attrition with teachers under the age of 35 posing the greatest attrition risk. Although the research results are mixed, it appears that in special education young female teachers leave the classroom at a higher rate and return at the same rate as male teachers (Singer, 1993b). The role of race as a factor in attrition is not clear; however, teachers who are racially different from the majority of their students appear to be at great risk for attrition (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

*Family* factors account for a significant amount of attrition in both general and special education. Marriage, birth of children, and relocation are often cited reasons for termination or interruption of a teaching career, particularly in the early years. Research in general education teacher attrition also showed that persons from higher socio-economic classes are at greater risk for leaving the profession (Billingsley, 1993).

Although it is easy to see that cognitive/affective variables, such as interests, expectations, motivations, and/or personality would affect teachers' career decisions, these factors have rarely been studied. A study by Brownell, Smith, & Lenk (1993) focusing on special educators suggests that teachers who remain in the classroom enter the profession with more successful coping strategies and higher degrees of teacher efficacy.

### ***Summary: Snapshot of Teacher Attrition Factors***

Singly or in concert, research has identified the following elements of teacher attrition:

#### ***The Teacher:***

- young ( $\leq 30$  yrs)
- female
- high scores on teacher exam
- mid to upper SES
- little experience
- low level commitment to teaching
- ineffective coping strategies

#### ***The Environment:***

- high school teaching assignment
- SED or speech assignment
- high class size/caseload
- unsupportive administrator
- excessive paperwork
- ambiguous or conflicting role demands
- few job rewards
- lack of decision making opportunities

### ***Teacher Attrition Factors Attributable to Urban/Rural Environments***

Urban and rural environments are associated with certain stressors on teacher retention. Some of the factors discussed above are compounded in urban and or rural environments--in other cases new and different factors come into play.

*Urban settings.* The following factors are consistent with high teacher turnover in urban schools: limited classroom resources (e.g., books, paper), greater bureaucratic restraints, large class sizes or caseloads, and students with significant social or behavioral problems. The negative influences of these factors are compounded when considering that urban schools must function with proportionately more new and uncertified instructors (Ascher, 1992) than rural and suburban schools.

*Rural settings.* Stern (1994) reviewed the research on teacher attrition in rural environments and identified the following considerations: low salaries or poor benefits; multiple teaching assignments (i.e., more than one subject, particularly in secondary schools); and little control over school policy. Interestingly, in the research done thus far, rural teachers were not found to have appreciably smaller class sizes or to differ markedly from their non-rural peers in expressions of job satisfaction/dissatisfaction. However, rural teachers were identified as having less professional preparation than teachers in other settings.

### ***Issues in the Retention of Related Services Professionals***

The data on attrition of related services professionals, including speech/language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and school psychologists is sketchy, and to some extent, contradictory. For example, Singer (1993a) found that professionals providing support services were at the greatest risk for leaving the schools. More recently, a study on teacher attrition completed in the Memphis city schools found that the exit rates of speech pathologists did not differ significantly from other special education teachers (Pyecha & Levine, 1995). Despite variable attrition data, the recruitment and retention of related service personnel remains an issue due to the pervasive need for and the limited supply of such personnel throughout the country.

A number of factors have been linked to job dissatisfaction among related service professionals in school settings, including a) salary, b) inadequate work and/or office space, c) inadequate equipment or materials, d) excessive caseloads, e) limited staff development, and f) isolation from colleagues (Goldberg, 1993; Whitworth, 1994). Many of these elements are different from those identified in the teacher attrition literature and require different interventions. Since school settings must compete with other agencies (e.g., hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, residential facilities) for related service personnel, it is important that schools provide environments that attract and retain these professionals by addressing reasons for leaving the profession, as well as the setting.



## References

- Ascher, C. (1992). *Retaining good teachers in urban schools* (ERIC Digest No. 90-4). Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education.
- Billingsley, B. S. (1993). Teacher retention and attrition in special and general education: A critical review of the literature. *The Journal of Special Education, 27*, 137-174.
- Billingsley, B. S., & Cross, L.H. (1991). Teachers' decisions to transfer from special to general education. *The Journal of Special Education, 24*, 496-511.
- Brownell, M. T., & Smith, S. W. (1993). Understanding special education teacher attrition: A conceptual model and implications for teacher educators. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 16*, 270-282.
- Brownell, M. T., Smith, S. W., & Lenk, L. (1993, April). *Teacher attrition in special education: Qualitative inquiry into teachers' decisions to stay in or leave the classroom*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA.
- Cooley, E., & Yovanoff, P. (1994). *Supporting professionals-at-risk: Evaluating interventions to reduce burnout and improve retention of special educators*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Furtwengler, C. B. (1995). Beginning teachers programs: Analysis of state actions during the reform era. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* [On-line], 3(3). Available: as a LISTSERV under the name EDPLOYAR at ASUACAD.BITNET (Internet address: ASUVM.INRE.ASU.EDU).
- Goldberg, B. (1993, November). Recipe for tragedy: Personnel shortages in the public schools. *Asha, 35*, 36-40.
- Murnane, R. J., Singer, J. D., & Willett, J. B. (1988). The career paths of teachers: Implications for teacher supply and methodological lessons for research. *Educational Researcher, 17*(6), 22-30.
- Pyecha, J., & Levine, R. (1995, May). *The attrition picture: Lessons from three research projects (Working Paper #3)*. Paper presented at the National Dissemination Forum on Special Education Teacher Satisfaction, Retention, and Attrition. Washington, DC.
- Singer, J. D. (1993a). Once is not enough: Former special educators who return to teaching. *Exceptional Children, 60*, 58-72.
- Singer, J. D. (1993b). Are special educators' career paths special? Results from a 13-year longitudinal study. *Exceptional Children, 59*, 262-279.
- Smith-Davis, J. (1992, May). *Personnel supply, demand, recruitment and retention*. Paper presented at the Institute on Strategic Planning, National CSPD Collaboration Institute Project, New Orleans, LA.
- Smith-Davis, J., & Billingsley, B. S. (1993). The supply/demand puzzle. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 16*, 205-220.
- Stern, J. D. (Ed.). (1994). *The condition of education in rural schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- U. S. Department of Education. (1994). *Sixteenth annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Whitworth, J. E. (1994). The shortage of occupational therapy and physical therapy personnel in schools: Implications and actions. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 48*, 367-370.