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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a state pilot project which addressed Missouri's current and anticipated special education teacher shortages by reinventing teacher education and using new technologies and service delivery models to increase the quality and supply of special educators. It worked to certify current general educators as special educators. The first year of the pilot project is described, including development as a collaborative effort among the university, the state department of education, 50 teachers, and 17 local school districts. The paper examines startup and design of the curriculum, recruitment and selection of teachers, introduction of distance learning technologies, and initial evaluation of the first year. Evaluation data include Praxis test scores, participant feedback, administrator comments, and a state department of education audit. The project successfully increased the supply of special educators and improved the quality of teaching. Lessons learned included: the project was extremely labor intensive for faculty and staff; adult learners needed nurturance and support beyond what is traditionally available; district support was crucial; veteran teachers who transferred into special education learned about the invisibility of special education; and general educators needed and desired more understanding and professional competence to be prepared for inclusive classrooms. (SM)

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A paper presented by Kathleen Sullivan Brown and Delores M. John

University of Missouri St. Louis

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Meeting the twin challenges: improving teacher quality and supply in state pilot project for "Special Education Transition Certification"

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Introduction

Schools in Missouri face an acute and growing shortage of special educators. Within the next five years the shortage will increase due to growth in student populations; large numbers of special educators leaving the field due to burnout, dissatisfaction with working conditions, and lack of support; while, on the other hand, small numbers of new teachers enter the field of special education. This innovative state pilot project addressed the current and expected shortages in Missouri by "reinventing teacher education" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1997) and bringing together new technologies and service delivery models to increase both the quality and the supply of special educators.

In this paper, the first year of the pilot project is described, including the development of the project as a collaborative effort among the university, the state department of education, fifty teacher participants, and seventeen local school districts. This story is set in a national context of teacher education reform and a regional and local context of urgent needs expressed by school district superintendents and the state office of teacher certification. Included here are brief descriptions of the start-up and design of the curriculum, the recruitment and selection of teachers, the introduction of distance learning technologies, and the initial evaluation of the first year's efforts. Evaluation data

include Praxis test scores, participant feedback, administrator comments, and a state department of education audit.

Development of the Project

In 1993 the Missouri Legislature declared special education as one of several "critical needs" in the state. Shortages existed in the number and the geographical distribution of teachers with special education certification. The St. Louis Public Schools, the state's largest school district with 45,000 students, opened the school year in September 1999 with 300 teacher vacancies, half of them in special education classrooms. In addition, superintendents in many rural districts reported that they had advertised without success for teachers to fill special education positions. These superintendents met with the state department of education and asked for immediate relief with these shortages. The state department in turn asked area universities and the special education network for ideas to address the shortage problem.

When faculty of the University of Missouri St. Louis analyzed the shortage, they concluded that "the problem" was actually several problems. First, too few new teachers were becoming certified in special education. Second, too many teachers in special education were leaving the field, citing burnout and other types of job dissatisfaction. At the same time, the shortage was exacerbated by a growing number of K-12 students being identified as having special needs. It was also apparent, looking at the data on teacher certification, that some areas of teacher surplus existed. The state had more teachers with elementary regular education certification than there were positions to fill.

Further analysis of these issues also led the faculty to conclude that the preparation of special education teachers needed to change. Traditional, in-classroom

lectures dominated teacher preparation in special education, just as it did in regular education. Like the reform efforts in regular education (Missouri Commission on Teaching, 1998), preparation of special educators also needed to become more field-based, collaborative, inquiry-based, and technology-driven. These are the four pillars of the University of Missouri St. Louis' strategic plan to reform the entire teacher education program (University of Missouri - St. Louis, 1998). How could these reform themes be brought together in a creative solution for the special education shortage?

Program and Pedagogical Goals

The University proposed a model for a state-sponsored pilot program. The primary goal of the pilot project was recruitment: the project intended to meet the critical need for additional special education teachers by increasing the number of professionally qualified, competent, and caring teachers in the field.

A second project goal was retention. The program sought to attract individuals with a solid understanding of teaching and a deep understanding of their local community context, and then to better prepare them for special education and inclusive settings, thereby increasing the likelihood that these teachers would remain in special education in these communities (Meyers and Smith, 1999).

Finally, the third goal was replication. The pilot was designed to be replicated by other teacher education programs. In this way, the project could help address the urgent needs in the St. Louis region and the rest of the state, while addressing the national shortages of special educators as well (Boe, Cook, et al, 1998).

This model received the endorsement of the state department of education and the cooperation of local school districts. School districts agreed to participate which meant

they could identify a regular education teacher to be placed in a special education classroom while pursuing the transition certification to special education in this accelerated two-year program. The state department was not interested in an "alternative certification" program, and this was not intended for paraprofessionals (Burstein and Sears, 1998). Missouri has been reluctant to move in that direction, so the pilot emphasized the professional development of regular education teachers for K-12 cross-categorical certification. However, the state did agree to use a restricted provisional certification for these teachers. Teachers received a provisional special education certificate from the state, which was only valid in that single school district while the participant remains enrolled in the pilot project.

Keeping in mind the four reform themes which the School of Education had articulated in its strategic plan, designers of the pilot proposal sought to create a program that also was field-based, collaborative, inquiry-directed, and technology driven. The proposal achieved these goals through five major features:

- The new pilot program would be based on competencies for special education (Council for Exceptional Children, 1998).
- Districts would help identify and recruit participants and would assist the University in the mentoring process.
- Participants would benefit from full-time employment within the district in return for a multi-year commitment to that district.
- A new teaching model would be developed which included cohorts for support, reflective practice and inquiry learning, and strong emphasis on distance learning technologies.

- Performance-based assessment would include Praxis scores, portfolios, and feedback from mentors and building administrators.

Partnership Roles

Each partner in the collaboration had specific roles and responsibilities that were spelled out in a memorandum of understanding. The University provided faculty and administrative leadership, technological support for distance learning, and field-based instruction and mentoring. School-based and retired practitioners acted as on-site mentors and also assisted with team-teaching of specific content. Participants committed themselves to full-time teaching and part-time study. Districts agreed to recruit teachers, and then provide on-site mentors as well as technology and computer support.

Fifty participants began the pilot in the late summer of 1998. Two cohorts – one urban in the St. Louis Public Schools, and one rural involving 16 area school districts – began meeting and learning in face-to-face classes, satellite broadcasts, email and listserv, and small groups instead of a traditional once or twice a week on-campus class meeting. Faculty worked to redesign the existing curriculum, using the international standards for competencies in special education. The program began in the summer with an intense immersion in the history, philosophy, language and legal context of special education. In addition to introducing the cohort groups and getting participants online, their first course also had a practical focus, helping teachers think about and design classroom management plans to help them get ready for the opening of school.

Added Challenges

Early challenges in the pilot dealt with issues of faculty resources, curriculum acceleration and adaptation, technology access, and institutional barriers that arose within schools, school districts, the state, and the university structure.

The first challenge was who would teach in this experimental program. Full-time faculty in special education already had their hands full. The University answered this challenge by using its Continuing Education unit as the first home for the pilot. This unit had the staff and budget flexibility to innovate and to "build the airplane in flight." Practitioners such as speech and language specialists were recruited to teach modules within courses, while two program coordinators worked on making connections between modules and keeping continuity from course to course. Each faculty member who worked in the project learned about new ways to approach adult learning, and many who had never used technology-assisted instruction also learned about that aspect of teaching.

Another challenge was the curriculum. Moving away from "seat time" toward an emphasis on extended clinical performance with reflection was a giant leap. Peer and performance-based assessment of skills, knowledge, and caring for students with disabilities became hallmarks of the program. The move was not made without bruises and missteps. Project participants sometimes had to wait for the next reading assignment or the next module to be posted on the web site. They were often hungry for more information, and the faculty and staff of the program often were teaching one course while creating the next at the same time. The rhythm of the traditional semester disintegrated, replaced by a juggling act of course registration, curriculum development,

technology learning, responding to reflective journals, and negotiating issues of personnel, policy and procedure within the various institutional mazes.

Faculty felt the tension and the responsibility of preparing teachers for work in classrooms where students need highly skilled teachers. Historically, teacher preparation in Missouri had focused on differentiation and specialization although, in recent years, there has been a move toward more integration with emphasis on "unified" studies, literacy and inclusion. The pilot project followed this later direction and tried to focus on the elements of "good teaching," including communication, problem-solving and inquiry skills. With the field of special education changing so quickly as more is discovered about students' learning needs, the philosophy of the pilot program came to focus on teaching and learning of all students, including the participants and the faculty. Participants learned from each other, and they were encouraged to share their learning with their building colleagues. One of the most satisfying comments about the pilot came in a survey of administrators, several of whom reported that the pilot participants had benefited their entire district. Pilot participants often became change agents in their districts, bringing in updates on legislation and technique, sometimes coaching their coaches.

A difficult hurdle was to get teachers connected online to provide access to the Web-based course materials and to each other as a virtual learning community. University technology staff members were available to answer questions from individual participants about their district hardware and software configurations. In a few cases, participants' first use of "technology" came in the guise of the school fax machine and at-home computers. Gradually, the pace and level of technological sophistication grew to

email, listservs, writing and posting teaching cases online, sending attachments, and using Web-based resources for information-gathering. For example, one teacher needed to deepen her understanding and reserves of information for parents about students with autism. She was able to link to web sites that provided a wealth of information on autism. Another satisfying benchmark occurred when a participant used the course website links to join the Council for Exceptional Children. This was the first time that this individual teacher had used the Web this way.

These small victories kept faculty going when the labor-intensive nature of the pilot seemed almost overwhelming. When the bureaucracies collided, even these bright moments were sometimes not enough to keep spirits up. One reflective note, written in frustration early in the pilot, read: "There is no closure in this program." Loose ends, asynchronous learning, mind-numbing red-tape, and whimsical policy changes all led faculty at times to yearn for a traditional class meeting on Monday-Wednesday afternoons with a paper due at the end of the course. Instead, students called and emailed daily, site visits began to happen regularly, and participants began to sound more and more like veterans in their classrooms. They mastered the language of special education, and they were beginning to internalize and publicly express their commitment to special needs students.

Fortunately, the pilot involved a strong commitment to formative as well as summative evaluation. Throughout the program, faculty and participants were able to see the progress in student experiences and reflections and be buoyed up by these successes. Mentors, parents, and building principals provided on-site support and monitoring. One

teacher reassignment was necessary, but the teacher placements were remarkably successful.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Hard evidence for the success of the special education transition certification pilot project is readily available. Goal one, recruitment, was successful in the overall number of fifty participants in the first two cohorts. Additionally, demographics of those two cohorts showed strong representation of African American teachers and male teachers, two groups that have been underrepresented in the teaching ranks (Appendix A). Goal two, retention, was also successfully achieved when forty-five of the original fifty participants (95%) remained enrolled in the program and in their classrooms. As we approach the end of the second year, the retention rate is high with 84% of the original fifty still enrolled. Most of these teachers are still in their original classroom placement. This means that the parents and students benefit from more continuity in classrooms that have been difficult to staff. The revolving door of short-term hires and serial substitutes has been replaced by the stable presence of a qualified teacher for hundreds of students in seventeen school districts. In a few notable instances, principals have reported a building change when a teacher was able to work successfully with children whose behaviors previously disrupted the learning environment of the entire school.

Additional evidence for the value of the pilot approach comes in the form of early Praxis scores. The first group of 21 participants took the Praxis in November 1999. The pass rate was 95%, or 20 of 21 test-takers. The mean passing score was 613. This is 125% of the score that Missouri requires (490). The median passing score was 590, and the range of passing scores was 530 to 740. Clearly these participants have demonstrated

their competency with their classroom performance, their peer reviews, and their core knowledge as tested by the Praxis. A second group of test takers will sit for the Praxis this spring.

State auditors visited the project site, interviewed faculty, reviewed portfolios, and surveyed teachers and administrators. The major concern that arose in the audit was the intensity of the districts' commitment to their mentoring role. Support from building principals and teacher colleagues is recognized as a critical factor in retaining new teachers, and Missouri has a major mentoring effort underway to teach mentoring skills and to redesign all mentoring programs. The pilot project also recognized mentoring as the least satisfactory element of the pilot's first year, and mentor training is a stronger component in year two.

Lessons Learned

The pilot project met the twin challenges by increasing the supply of special education teachers and improving the quality of teaching. Lessons learned during the first year of the pilot can be summed up with five critical points.

- As an R & D project, the pilot was extremely labor intensive for faculty and staff. For the purposes of replicability, these development costs will have to be reduced as the pilot becomes institutionalized if other teacher education programs are to be expected to undertake similar efforts. The question remains open as to whether the development costs can be significantly reduced given the collaborative nature of this way of teaching. If these personnel costs cannot be significantly constrained, then the state may be required to underwrite major support for the universities, for the districts, and for the participants in this type of program.

Without cost reduction in some form, these critical needs will not be met and shortages will continue.

- Adult learners who take on this type of responsibility need nurturance and support in ways that go well beyond the traditional advising and collegial support the university typically offers. This lesson was reinforced during the pilot project as participants dealt with the myriad problems that arise for adult caretakers in this, the "sandwich" generation.
- District support in this type of partnership is crucial, particularly from the building principal. Teachers in the pilot who had supportive principals and in-building mentors were able to be the most successful in their dual role of classroom teacher and graduate student.
- Veteran teachers who transitioned from general education to "special education" learned about the invisibility of special education. Without exception these teachers felt that the pilot program helped them to become better teachers who developed a greater understanding of their own learning strengths and those of all their K-12 students.
- General education teachers need and desire much greater levels of understanding and professional competence to be prepared for inclusive classrooms.

The Special Education Transition Certification Pilot is nearing the end of its second year of operation. The state has extended the pilot for another two years. The third and fourth cohorts are underway, and the curriculum has been continually refined. As the first two cohorts of participants near completion of their transition certification, they are now beginning to consider continuing their formal education by

enrolling in master's programs. However, these participants do not want to go back to the traditional weekly lecture on campus. They have experienced a new form of job-embedded professional learning and they want more. Faculty participants gained a greater appreciation for the traditional service delivery model for its reflective pace. They too have found this to be an exhilarating experience, frustrating at times, but one they would not have missed.

Teacher education must continue to meet the twin challenges of improving the quality of teaching while increasing the number of caring, competent and skilled teachers in hard-to-staff classrooms. "Schools, colleges and departments of education must work collaboratively with state departments and school districts to increase the number of qualified candidates; attract a wider range of people to teaching, including minority and nontraditional candidates; and maintain high quality in the preparation of teachers" (Journal of Teacher Education, May-June, 1998) to effect curricular reforms and achievement goals. The Special Education Transition Pilot began with recognition of two pressing needs that seem contradictory: to increase the supply of teachers and to improve the quality of teaching. Key to meeting these twin challenges is to think of teacher education is an entirely different light. University faculty, school district personnel, state departments and teachers themselves must be creative and take risks in order to accomplish both of these urgent goals.

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Appendix A: Demographics of Pilot Participants

	Caucasian	African-American	Total
Males	5	5	10
% Males	11%	11%	22%
Females	29	7	36
% Females	63%	15%	78%
Total	**34**	**12**	**46**
	73%	26% *	100%

* The population proportion of African-Americans in the St. Louis area is 25% (City) and 12% (Region).

Participants' Age Range: 22-63

Mean Age: 37

Median Age: 37

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