

# **A National Perspective: An Analysis of Factors That Influence Special Educators to Remain in the Field of Education**

**Lautrice M. Nickson**

PhD Program Student in Educational  
Leadership  
Prairie View A&M University  
**Assistant Principal**  
Coulson Tough K-6 School  
Conroe Independent School District  
Conroe, Texas

**William Allan Kritsonis, PhD**  
**Professor**

PhD Program in Educational Leadership  
Prairie View A&M University  
**Distinguished Alumnus (2004)**  
Central Washington University  
College of Education and Professional Studies  
**Visiting Lecturer (2005)**  
Oxford Round Table  
University of Oxford, Oxford, England  
**ACRL – Harvard Leadership Institute (2006)**  
Harvard Graduate School of Education  
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

---

## **ABSTRACT**

**The purpose of this article is to analyze factors that influence special educators to remain in the field of education. School administrators are perplexed by the large number of teachers who decide to leave the field of education after three years. The retention rates of special educators' require school administrators to focus on developing a qualified workforce. Careful attention to the working conditions and the induction of early career special educators is needed if we are to build a committed and qualified teaching force (Billingsley, 2004).**

---

**T**he purpose of this article is to discuss factors that influence special educators to remain in education. Teaching is a relatively large occupation- it represents 4% of the entire civilian workforce (Menchaca,2004). For at least two decades there has been a shortage of fully certified special education teachers in the United States. However, it is only recently that this shortage has received significant attention from policy makers at the national level (Billingsley and McLeskey, 2004). Policymakers and education leaders have become convinced that if they are going to make significant

improvements in the quality of education, good teachers are critically important (Kaff, 2004). Resolving the personnel shortage issue in special education is a difficult task that many administrators are faced with. Keeping good effective teachers constitute a valuable human resource and should be one of the most important agenda items for school leaders (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

### **Support**

Burnout and attrition continue to rise among teachers. In the field of special education it has reached epidemic proportion. The annual attrition rate for special education teachers has been estimated to be between 8% and 10%. Central administration, building administrators, and other teachers must provide support to special education teachers in order to decrease the attrition percentage (Gersten, et. al., 2001).

Special education teachers are more likely to stay in the field of education if they view their schools as good places to work. Positive work conditions include a wide range of variables and a positive school climate. School climate is a good predictor to indicate if a teacher will stay in a particular school. Teachers are more likely to remain in teaching if they perceive their schools as a great place to work. According to Singh and Billingsley (1996) perceptions of principal support increased for teachers of emotional disorders and other special education students, so did their job satisfaction.

### **Mentoring**

Researchers point to the first year of teaching as being pivotal to teachers' futures in the field (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997, Mastropieri, 2001; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997 as cited in Wasburn-Moses, 2005) and recommend that new teachers be given mentors. Mentors can ease the transition process by offering support and suggestions. They can also serve as role models for finding satisfaction in teaching children who have special challenges (Stempien and Loeb, 2002). Mentors should be matched with novice special educators who can provide advice and direction in stressful situations (Wisniewski & Garguilo, 1997).

Experienced mentors help beginning teachers deal with issues that they may encounter on a daily basis. Through mentors, novice teachers are also provided feedback, instructional strategies, and insights into district guidelines as they relate to special education. Research stresses the importance of providing a special education mentor for special education novice teachers even if the mentor works in a different school. It would be difficult for even an experienced regular education teacher to explain the many protocols that special education teachers must follow.

---

## **Staff Developments**

In order for students to improve academically, professional development is a critical support that must be provided for all teachers. Teachers desire new challenges because they want to learn, develop better skills, and obtain greater knowledge about their practice (Rosenholtz, 1989). Many experts in the field of education believe that staff development is crucial for novice teachers when deciding if they will continue in the field of education.

## **Level of Education**

Banks and Necco (1987) found that the typical graduate degree holder taught for over three years longer than the average undergraduate degree holder". Attrition rates of teachers with graduate training were significantly lower than the attrition rates of teachers with only a B.A. (Bogenschild et al.,1988).

## **Work Conditions Factors**

Work condition factors include those variables that may be influenced mostly directly by school district administrators. Special education administrators, principal support, teacher assignment, role problems, and stress are all factors that influence work conditions. Principal support, role problems, and stress were found to be significantly related to both job satisfaction and commitment and thus indirectly related teachers' expressed intentions to remain in the field of special education (Cross and Billingsley, 1994).

## **Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction directly correlates with teacher retention. Research states that workplace conditions play an important factor in the detraction of job satisfaction for teachers: the more factorable the conditions, the higher the more satisfied that they will be in their jobs. Salaries, retirement benefits, and health insurance programs are important, but they are often less important than other factors. Teachers who work in building where there is a lack of administrative and parent support or the school climate is not conducive to learning then the chance of higher attrition rates are possible. Norton

(1999), states that if an employee is not satisfied, he/she may seek employment elsewhere.

Administrators have been charged with the daunting task of maintaining a qualified, diverse, and stable teaching force. However, as Nicholas & Sosnowsky (2002) state, special education teachers are leaving the field in much greater numbers than their peers in general education. In fact, special educators leave the classroom at about twice the rate of their regular education colleagues some areas report attrition rates as high as 50% yearly (Mitchell & Arnold, 2004). This is a critical challenge in special education today.

Keeping good teachers in special education classrooms is a priority for school leaders. In order to cultivate qualified special educators, school leaders must provide conditions in which they can grow professionally (Billingsley, 2004). For example, they must create work environments that sustain special educators' involvement and commitment (Billingsley, 2004). Administrators are searching for other ways to keep special education teachers in the classroom.

In conclusion, this investigation was concerned with identifying other factors that may contribute to higher special education teachers' retention. Specifically, this investigation will look at several factors that the literature identifies as influencing teacher retention. These factors are: supportive administrators, job satisfaction, commitment, school climate, and mentor programs. Further research in this area is critical to the retention of special educators in the field of education.

## References

- Banks, S.R., & Necco, E.G. (1987). Alternative certification, educational training, and job longevity, Action in Teacher Education, 9, 67-73.
- Billingsley, B. (2004). Promoting teacher quality and retention in special education, Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37, (5) 370-376.
- Billingsley, B and McLeskey, A. (2004). Special Education teacher retention and attrition: a critical analysis of the research literature. The Journal of Special Education, 38(1), 39-55.
- Bogenschild, G.G., Lauritzen, P., & Metzke, L. (1988). A study of teach attrition. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, College of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 311 614).
- Cross, L.H., & Billingsley, B.S. (1994). Testing a model of special educators' intent to stay in teaching. Exceptional Children, 60, 411- 21.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). Teachers what leaders can do. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 60, (8), 7-13.
- Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanoff, P. & Harniss, M.K. (2001). Working in special education: Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. Exceptional Children, 67, 549-567.
- Kaff, M. (2004). Multitasking is multitaxing: Why special educators are leaving the field. Preventing School Failure, 48(2), 10-17.
- Menchaca, V. (2004). A wake-up call for principals: Are your novice teachers leaving? Catalyst Change, 33, 25-27.
- Mitchell, A. & Arnold, M. (2004). Behavior management skills as predictors of retention among south Texas special educators, Journal of Instructional Psychology, 31 (3), 214-219.
- Nichols, A.S., & Sosnowsky, F.L. (2002). Burnout among special education teachers in self-contained cross-categorical classrooms. Teacher Education and Special Education, 25 (1), 71-86.
- Norton, S. (1999). Teacher retention: reducing costly teacher turnover. Contemporary Education, 70, (3), 52-55.
- Rosenholtz, S. (1989). Workplace conditions that affect teacher quality and commitment: Implications for teacher induction programs. The Elementary School Journal, 89, 421-439.
- Singh, K. & Billingsley, B.S. (1996). Intent to stay in teaching: teachers of students with emotional disorders versus other special educators. Remedial and Special Education, 17(1), 37-47.
- Stempien, L. & Loeb, R. (2002). Differences in job satisfaction between general education and special education teachers implications for retention. Remedial and Special Education, 23(5), 258-267.
- Wasburn-Moses, L. (2005). How to keep your special education teachers. Principal Leadership, 5 (5), 35-38.
- Wisniewski, L & Gargiulo, R.M. (1997). Occupational and stress and burnout Among special educators: A review of the literature. Journal of Special Education, 32(3), 325-346.