RESEARCH BRIEF

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The **TEACHER SUPPORT** Program

How can we build upon the research concerning supporting special education teachers in the field to increase retention, relieve stress, and advance the profession?

The Study

Westling, D. L., Herzog, M. J., Cooper-Duffy, K., Prohn, K., & Ray, M. (2006). The Teacher Support Program: A proposed resource for the special education profession and an initial validation. *Remedial and Special Education, 27*(3), 136–147.

Methodology

Building upon previous research in the field of special education, this study examines the impact of the Teacher Support Program (TSP) developed in western North Carolina with volunteer special education teachers from the region.[1] The study examines how the model

[1] As such, the participants were not randomly sampled and were only from a relatively limited geographical area.

was implemented from 2000 to 2003. During this time, services were provided to 178 individuals (approximately 20 percent of special educators in the region). Several data collection methods were employed throughout the study, including annual surveys, individual interviews, document analyses, and classroom observations.

In Brief

The research literature is full of articles that address the stresses and strains of the special education profession. Many of these articles have described in detail the pressures that special education teachers face day in and day out. To address the ongoing issues of high stress levels, burnout, and attrition in the special education field, the study examined in this brief goes beyond reiterating what is known and presents possible solutions to issues facing the profession.

The proposed solution is the Teacher Support Program, which offers special educators opportunities for collaboration, staff development, and other supports during fall and spring semesters. The TSP model is a system for providing professional development opportunities that address curricular, instructional, and classroom management issues. The TSP also was designed to provide a menu of supports so that participants could choose the components that best fit their professional development needs. Supports were regularly scheduled—such as the Collaborative Problem Solving/Mutual Teacher Support sessions—while others were on an as-needed basis (e.g., peer mentoring). The TSP menu options, or components, that individual special educators could choose included the following:

- **Collaborative Problem Solving/Mutual Teacher Support.** Teachers work collaboratively in small groups to solve problems and provide mutual support.

- **Electronic Networking and Communication.** Participants post announcements, hold online discussion forums, and engage in live chats on the TSP website.

- **Information and Materials Search.** Special educators use this resource to request materials concerning instructional material and strategies for use in their own classroom.

- **Peer Mentoring.** Teachers develop a one-to-one relationship with a mentor.

- **On-Site/In-Class Consultation.** Special educators request the TSP coordinator, mentor, or university professor to come into their classroom and help solve a problem. The consultant observes the classroom and then conferences with the teacher to resolve an issue.

- **Teacher Release.** Substitute teachers are provided for TSP participants (on a limited basis) so they can attend staff development workshops.

- **Staff Development Workshops.** TSP leaders design sessions for professional development to be facilitated by an appropriate consultant based on teacher-identified topics.

Content of these various supports often were motivated by the participants. TSP was designed as a "bottom-up" approach rather than a traditional top-down approach so sessions could address participants' perceived needs directly. Issues addressed included differentiating instruction, classroom management, and improving relationships with their general education peers. As one participant described her classroom needs:

> The students have varying degrees of special needs; I have two hearing impaired, deaf children, one with a cochlear implant, one with Down's syndrome [who] is deaf. A little girl with multiple handicaps [who] does not speak and is using some signing. A little girl who is educable mentally disabled, and children with developmental delays. We have developmental ages from two, two and a half to beginning reading and kindergarten level, even though they are seven years old. (p. 141)

Also addressed in these sessions were the demands of the required paperwork and the lack of support that participants received back in their schools and districts.

TSP participation varied across the three years, as did the participation in each of the components. Although many participants chose more than one component, the most popular component was the Collaborative Problem Solving/Mutual Teacher Support. These sessions were conducted in several sites around the region and brought together special educators, the TSP coordinator, and university faculty members. Working in small groups (three to five participants), special educators could identify specific problems they faced and work on a plan to systematically solve them (e.g., differentiating the curriculum to address the diversity of students' special needs). About 10 of these sessions were regularly offered each semester. Not only were these sessions frequently attended, they also were highly rated on the evaluation surveys. Participants reported that the opportunity to share issues and collaboratively solve problems was very satisfying.

Other components such as on-site/in-class consultation, information and materials search, and the staff development workshops also

were utilized and rated well by a number of participants. In contrast, peer mentoring was the least popular component chosen, and electronic networking and communication was the lowest rated component. The authors theorized that difficulties in accessing the Internet were the cause for the low ratings of electronic networking and communication.

Through the various TSP components, teachers reportedly were able to identify and access opportunities for development that suited their preferences for receiving information in order to address school-level or classroom-level challenges. Teachers reported a renewed sense of personal and professional competence and a broader perspective of their own situation and perhaps most importantly, they gained insight into solving problems in their own classrooms. The study asserted that, "Many [participants] noted that the TSP offered more support than particular individuals, such as certain administrators, and was more helpful than particular services, such as traditional staff development" (p. 145).

In sum, given the level of participation and the positive feedback received, the study judged TSP to be a success. The authors found sufficient evidence to recommend programs that offer a variety of support services that could be accessed by special education professionals such as TSP should be implemented elsewhere.

Suggestions for School District Improvement

TSP was founded on the following five principles, which may inform school and district improvement processes:

- Teachers can help each other through collaborative problem solving as well as other types of mutual support, but can also benefit from additional expertise [such as university professors].

- A support program for teachers should be available to all teachers but not required of any, should offer multiple types of support, and should allow for flexible participation.

- A support program should provide valid information and assistance to deal with practical problems, and teachers should have the opportunity to specify the type of information or assistance they need and how it should be delivered.

- Support must be disassociated from evaluation or judgment.

- A support program should not create additional problems or increase stress. (p. 137)

These five principles helped form the program, but other principles were established as TSP was implemented. For example, the study found that if a program similar to TSP is embarked upon within a district or region, it is important that the program have a full-time coordinator. The TSP coordinator manages and conducts the various components of the program. Authors of the study also saw the credibility of this coordinator as critical to the success of the program. In their view, a coordinator should have knowledge of the local public school system, special education issues, and an ability to be facilitative and nonauthoritarian with teachers. In this case, the TSP coordinator had more than 20 years of experience working with students with disabilities and had a depth of knowledge in the area of applied behavior analysis and positive behavior supports.

The bottom-up approach also was seen as a positive aspect of TSP. Teachers reportedly liked the way the program was structured so it would address their needs in a practical way. Teachers also appreciated the program's flexibility and the autonomy it afforded them. The authors caution the reader that "programs such as the TSP must be careful to contribute to solving teachers' problems and easing their difficulties, not increasing them" (p. 145).

Challenges

Since TSP was a special grant-funded program and functioned outside of the traditional delivery system for professional development, the model may be challenging to implement. The model may need to be adapted slightly to fit into a

district or regional configuration. In addition, funding such a program may also prove to be a challenge. A district or school should consider tapping into the local or state-level funding stream and combining resources with other area districts or schools.

Bottom Line

While TSP participants reported the same stresses as other special education teachers, they felt TSP provided them with opportunities for individual and professional growth. "Most noteworthy," the authors wrote, "were the opportunities provided through the TSP for collegial interactions and support, for addressing specific problems and receiving assistance for them, and for acquiring new information that could be applied to students and classroom situations" (p. 142). All of the study participants reported that the TSP design is more helpful than traditional staff development models, and they noted that TSP is relevant, useful, and timely. Indeed, participants reported that the program helped them feel supported, try new instructional practices, and develop more confidence in their classroom management strategies. As one participant noted, "Lots of times I was so overwhelmed because I was in the middle of the problem, but once I could take a step back and look at it through someone else's eyes, it didn't seem quite so overwhelming. It is a fresh approach to it" (p. 142).

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Other Resources

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