

Local Special Education Administrators The High Turnover Rate in Kentucky and Solutions for the Future

Research Brief
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Introduction

Nationally, as well as in Kentucky, the growing challenges and responsibilities faced by Directors of Special Education (e.g., DoSEs) and early childhood coordinators are daunting (Bellamy & Iwaszuk, 2017). The need to deliver high quality services to infants, toddlers, and youth with disabilities places a premium on highly skilled local DoSEs. In Kentucky, many local DoSEs also hold the added role as supervisors for the Local Education Agency's (LEA) early childhood program. It has become increasingly clear throughout the country there is an ongoing challenge to identify, recruit, and prepare highly skilled local DoSEs, early intervention service leaders, and Part C coordinators as well as retain high quality leadership.

Challenges in Kentucky

- There were 255 different persons serving as DoSE in the past five years for a state with 172 LEAs.
- Only 61.3% of current DoSEs have five or more years of experience.
- From 2018-2020 DoSE turnover rate was 15.5%.

Background

Kentucky is focused on capacity building to facilitate systems change by increasing the number and capacity of certified DoSEs, and early intervention service leaders to address the following challenges.

National trends confirm a growing problem of leadership shortages and high turnover. According to the National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) (2018A, 2018B), at the state level over the last five years, there has been nearly a 100% turnover among State Special Education Directors (Part B) (Table 1). The tables below outline significant trends and challenges across the country but also in Kentucky (Chart 1 & Table 3).

Year	2005–09	2010–14	2015–10
New State Part B Directors across U.S.	5	47	60

Table 1: *New state special education directors by year.*
National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI, 2018b)

Staff turnover in leadership positions in early childhood Part C Lead Agencies (LA) is also occurring at an increasing rate. State-level changes impact the continuity of implementation and improvement work under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The NCSI, in collaboration with the Infant and Toddler Coordinators Association (ITCA), identified the turnover in coordinators on the state early intervention systems and state Part C programs. The table below reflects this alarming trend.

Year	2005	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Part C Coordinators	39% Baseline	60%	60%	62%	67%	73%	71%	70%

Table 2: *Part C coordinators with 5 years or less experience*
National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI, 2018b)

In 2005, 39% of Part C Coordinators had five or fewer years of experience while 61% had six or more years' experience (NCSI, 2018b). In 2018, the data reversed with 73% having five years or less experience and only 27% with six or more years' experience.

In addition, research conducted by Lashley & Boscardin (2003) and Muller (2009) revealed that when 10-15% of special education positions turn over each year, significant stress is placed on local and state systems. This type of leadership turnover causes numerous problems for local districts such as difficulty in finding adequate replacements, given that Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) cannot produce enough

candidates. It also causes disruption in special education program continuity across these districts that hinders long term planning, program improvement and instructional planning efforts. In Kentucky, these same statistics are true at the local level pertaining to DoSEs and early childhood coordinators.

A five-year analysis of employment data for Kentucky’s DoSE, shown in chart 1, revealed significant turn over and transition found in the Kentucky Department of Education’s (KDE) 172 LEAs. Additional information provided by the KDE (2018, 2019), indicate upward of 15% new DoSEs joining Kentucky districts.

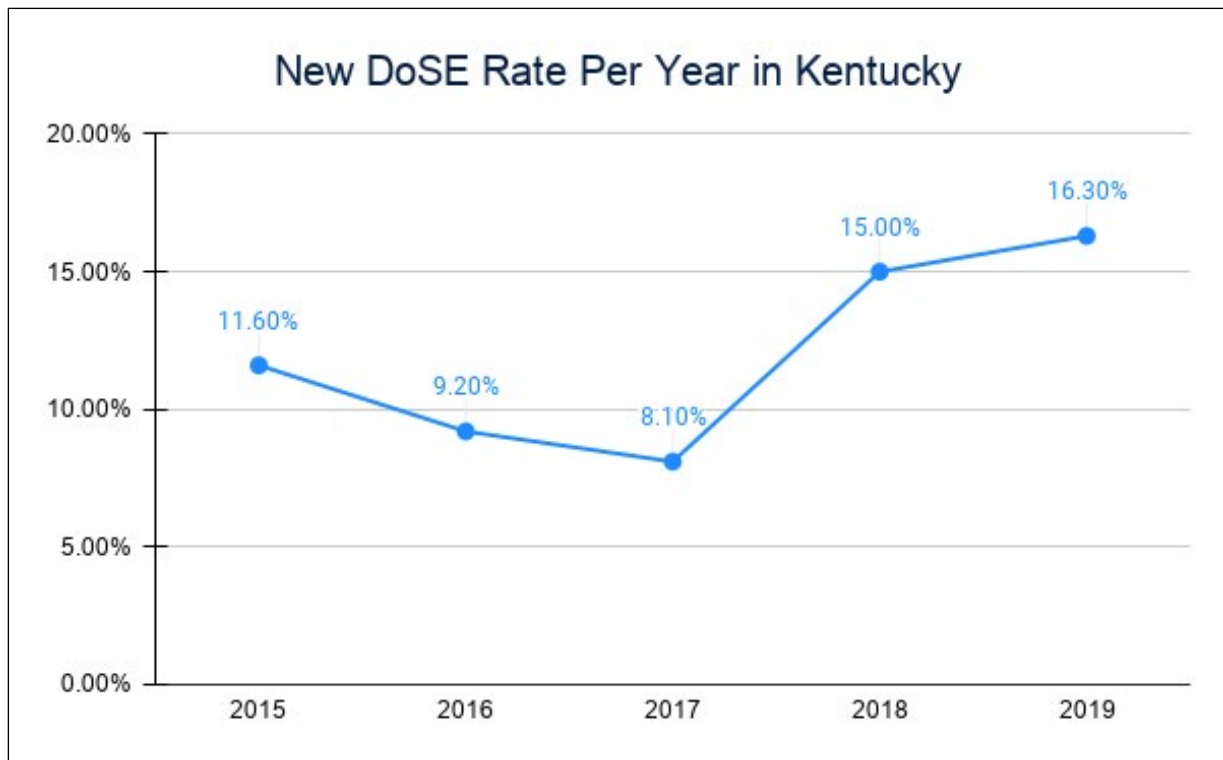


Chart 1: New DoSE Employment Rate per Year in Kentucky

In addition to DoSEs retiring, a number frequently moved to different school districts. When data are viewed in totality, a larger trend is seen that shows a state with significant turnover and transition in district level DoSE positions. This is demonstrated in the table below.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
DoSEs Staying in Current District	152	154	158	144	144
DoSEs Moving from Current District	1	3	1	3	0
DoSEs New to District	20	16	14	26	28

Table 3: Kentucky Part B Directors of Special Education Data (KDE, 2020)

Informal conversation with the leadership of the Kentucky Council for Administrators in Special Education (CASE) summer institute (personal communication, March 17, 2020) provided the following comments:

- There is always a high number of registrants, more than any other training.
- LEAs regularly ask to send support staff even if a new DoSE is not hired because the information and networking is so important given the turnover rate within the commonwealth.
- The yearly training institute is an informal way to support new DoSEs and is very needed.
- Given the high demand for this training, registrants are screened to confirm they are indeed new DoSEs given so many professionals want to attend.

Kentucky is working to require high standards for school leaders such as DoSEs. While Kentucky does require special education experience and certification to serve in the role of DoSE in a school district, no formal mentoring program or consistent network of supports is in place to promote the field to new candidates and support those currently in these roles. IHEs fill the certification role in Kentucky but only provide minimal support until students graduate. This lack of a formal statewide support network has significantly impacted the available highly qualified candidate pool to replace retiring DoSEs or help to decrease those leaving the position for less demanding jobs in LEAs. Those who do graduate with a certificate often show wide disparities in the knowledge and experience needed to lead improvement efforts in special education programs. DoSEs have stated “I had to learn a lot on the job” and “Some of the things I needed to know just were not covered in my certification program” (personal communication, March 21, 2020). One could infer that with so many new DoSEs learning on the job, the focus in many districts often stays on narrowly defined issues such as compliance as opposed to implementing a leadership approach that emphasizes a student outcomes-based approach. Information provided by the KDE (2020) reveals:

- There were 255 different persons serving as DoSE in the past five years for a state with 172 LEAs.
- Only 61.3% of current DoSEs have five or more years of experience.
- From 2018 - 2020 DoSE turnover rate was 15.5%.

DoSE Training Needs

New DoSEs need quality training and support networks. The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC's), CASE created national competencies for IHEs to follow when developing program curricula for DoSE certificate and degree programs (Boscardin, Weir & Kusek, 2010). The CEC's Early Childhood Division also developed IHE competencies for the Early Childhood Special Education/Early Intervention Specialist which mirror those of the DoSE. A sampling of these core competencies includes the following standards 1)

Assessment, 2) Curricular Content Knowledge, 3) Programs, Services and Outcomes, 4) Research and Inquiry, 5) Leadership and Policy, 6) Professional and Ethical Practice and 7) Collaboration. These competencies are vital for new DoSEs entering the field.

This information highlights the challenges Kentucky and many other states face. While Kentucky IHEs are providing accredited DoSE certification and degree programs, they are unable to dedicate enough faculty resources to recruit and mentor new candidates. They are also challenged to update curricula to address such emerging issues as trauma informed care, mental health assessment, foster care or best practices (e.g.; Implementation Science, data-driven decision making, root cause analysis). Funding cuts over the last eight years for program development and scholarships has limited Kentucky universities in their ability to invest in faculty expertise needed to offer preparation programs. This has forced more DoSEs to learn on the job, leaving them ill prepared for their complex job responsibilities. To address a similar challenge, the Virginia Department of Education started the Aspiring Leaders Academy. The Academy was developed to address the special education leadership shortage through IHE partnerships and strong mentoring components. It is now in its twelfth year of developing the next generation of special education leaders.

Another challenge is the job responsibilities of DoSEs quickly forces them to learn on their own or through informal regional networks. New DoSEs must quickly learn a wide variety of matters regarding current educational issues and policy initiatives at the federal, state and regional level. Some of these federal issues the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs includes are: 1) OSEP "Rethink" initiative, 2) Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and state policy issues 3) Pyramid Model implementation, 4) parent and family engagement, 5) shared decision making, effective educator development, 6) accessible instructional material, 7) improved local fiscal reporting, 8) physical restraint and seclusion, 9) enhanced state and federal special education data reporting, 10) Implementation Science, and 11) deaf/blind services. Without a systematic approach, DoSEs must learn these critical elements on their own or through informal regional networks. The vital knowledge and skill in these key educational issues and policy initiatives are just some of the information that is vital to be a successful DoSE.

DoSE Training and Challenges

Kentucky is working to develop and sustain a network to recruit, retain and increase the skills and capacity of DoSEs to supervise local early childhood and school district special education programs. The KDE has made developing such a network a priority by incorporating the creation and support of such a network into agency priorities along with enhanced university partnerships to recruit and retain new leadership.

Recruiting and retaining professionals in rural communities has long been a challenge for educators. Major challenges include high stress, a lack of support from administration and a lack of resources. These challenges are compounded in the field of special education, with 80% of rural schools having shortages in special education teachers and staff making the role of the DoSEs even more challenging (Hoppey, 2016; Timer & Carter, 2017). In Kentucky, the role of the DoSE is also compounded by a significant number of DoSEs leaving the position due to retirement, taking new positions within school districts or burnout (Table 3).

A vital component to overcoming the challenges facing rural school’s leadership, such as those found in Kentucky, is through the establishment of strong school-university partnerships with a mutual dependence that leverages expertise (DeSutter & LeMore, 2016; Hoppey, 2016). A sampling of university partners across the state allow for improved recruitment and retention efforts. These include Western Kentucky University (WKU), Morehead State University and Murray State University. WKU is located in the southern region of Kentucky, Morehead in the eastern region of Kentucky, and Murray in the western region of Kentucky. Each of these universities offer DoSE certification programs. The universities are effective (see Table 4) and produce high-quality graduates, just at a lower number and with ongoing support needed after graduation to retain program completers to work in administrative or leadership roles. Fortunately, the three universities have strong ties to the Kentucky Special Education Cooperative Network. These nine KDE-funded regional special education cooperatives (e.g., service centers) are also key partners in supporting new DoSEs in school districts.

State of Kentucky : DoSE Completers for Last 5 Years (2014–2019) by Institutions of Higher Education

Type of Degree	Morehead State University	Murray State University	Western Kentucky University	Graduates
Certificate	24	4	7	35
Certificate & Masters	0	0	3	3
Certificate +6hrs. Course Work	20	9	7	36
Certificate & Rank 1	3	0	3	6
Grand Total	47	13	20	80

Table 4: DoSE Certification Completers by IHE (KDE, 2020)

Proposed Support Network

A potential solution for states is to build a three-tiered support network. The first level consists of a mentoring component for new leaders aspiring for leadership experience and support. Level two will transition selected individuals from level one into IHE sponsored and accredited DoSE certification programs via scholarships to increase the number of certified DoSEs to lead local special education and early intervention programs. Level three involves continued support to graduates who have entered the field through Networking via structured monthly seminars. This ensures new leaders stay current on the latest research and program areas from external networks (e.g., Trauma Informed Care, Implementation Science, Foster Care, Mental Health Services, Restorative Justice, etc.). Program graduates in level three may also serve as mentors to new DoSE scholars at level one.

Summary & Recommendations

The need for DoSE support networks is based upon two important factors (a) a critical yearly turnover of DoSEs, and (b) a lack of existing infrastructure to support the recruitment, retention and increased capacity of DoSEs and Early Intervention Leaders across Kentucky that is so necessary in order to improve systems that are serving children with disabilities. This is supported through data collected by the KDE showing a growing need for new leadership development approaches to recruit and retain special education and early childhood leaders (Chart 1, Table 3) to slow the turnover rate and support those entering the field.

To that end, three recommendations should be considered by states wishing to improve supports and develop new DoSE to meet the challenges of the field:

Goal 1 (Recruit): Increase the number of persons who attain the state's initial level of *Advanced Educational Leader- Director of Special Education* certification to ensure that there is an adequate pipeline of eligible applicants to serve as state, regional, and local leaders to promote high expectations and improve early childhood and educational outcomes for children with disabilities and their families.

Goal 2 (Retain): Increase and nurture the number of persons whose job description includes supervising, directing, administering, or coordinating special education programs who have attained the state's highest level of *Advanced Educational Leader- Director of Special Education* certification.

Goal 3 (Increase Capacity): Expand and enhance the existing state network to ensure that state, regional, and local leaders have the knowledge, skills, and access necessary to improve early childhood and educational outcomes for children with disabilities and their families through the systems that serve them.

The implementation of a strong leadership development program requires collaboration and partnerships between early childhood educators, special educators, IHEs, the KDE and its regional special education cooperatives, early childhood centers and Kentucky's statewide Parent Resource Center. With the leadership team comprised of these key stakeholders, more comprehensive and improved recruiting, training and retention efforts can be achieved.

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