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An Induction Program for Special Education Teachers

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Program Context

Regardless of the quality of their preservice preparation programs, new teachers often leave the teaching profession; special education teachers are almost twice as likely to leave as general education teachers and more likely to leave within the first five years of employment (Claycomb, 2000; Crutchfield, 1997). Induction programs typically provide an array of supports to facilitate the transition into teaching (White & Mason, 2003). Teachers who participate in induction programs are more committed and satisfied with their jobs and more likely to remain in the profession (Whitaker, 2000). However, induction programs often do not focus on the unique responsibilities and challenges of special education teachers (Boyer & Gillespie, 2000).

The California Department of Education (CDE) established an induction program in 1992, the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) Program. California State University, Northridge (CSUN) has offered a BTSA program in collaboration with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) since BTSA's inception, to serve general and special education teachers in the local LAUSD districts closest to the university. The CDE provides financial support, and conducts state and regional meetings each year for BTSA directors to coordinate program goals and training objectives. To address the unique needs of special edu-

cation personnel, BTSA for Special Educators (BTSA-SE) was established in 1999 to serve first and second year special education teachers as part of the larger BTSA program at CSUN.

Program Features of BTSA-SE

During the four years of its implementation, 190 beginning special education teachers have participated in BTSA-SE with 75% of the beginning teachers (BTs) serving students in self-contained classrooms and most others teaching in Resource Specialist programs. Of this group, 45% taught in elementary schools, 20% in middle schools, 30% in high schools, and 5% in early childhood programs. Most BTs (90%) served students with mild/moderate disabilities; the remainder served students with moderate/severe disabilities. They worked primarily with low-income students who were diverse in language and culture. BTs were matched with 45 Support Providers (SPs), who were required to hold a special education credential with at least three years of experience and who had completed an application that included an administrator's recommendation. SPs' teaching experience in special education ranged from 5 to 32 years; 36 were teachers who served BTs at their own schools or traveled to schools nearby; 5 were retired teachers and 4 were program specialists.

Specific goals of the BTSA-SE program were to provide an effective transition into teaching for new special education teachers;

Induction Program
Kennedy & Burnstein

improve the educational performance of students with special needs through training, information and assistance for new teachers; facilitate retention of special educators in urban schools; and enhance collegiality and heighten teacher confidence. Five major program components addressed these goals:

1. *Individualized support.* SPs served in a non-evaluative, mentor role, interacting with BTs weekly through classroom visitations, after-school meetings, phone contact, and email.
2. *California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers (CFASST).* CFASST, a systematic assessment process for BTs based on the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP), provided a structure to guide professional growth by emphasizing reflective practice and self-assessment through a series of activities completed throughout a two-year period (Olebe, Jackson, & Danielson, 1999). In 2000, adaptations as well as web and print resources were added to CFASST to address the specific classroom and instructional needs of special educators.
3. *Professional release days.* Up to five release days were provided each year for new teachers to observe experienced special educators or exemplary programs.
4. *Professional development workshop series.* Workshops were held monthly, usually on Saturday mornings, with topics drawn from participants' suggestions and from state and district priorities (e.g., standards-based planning and instruction, positive behavior support, collaborative and inclusive practices, and assistive technology). Each session typically involved an activity from a CFASST event, followed by one or more guest presenters on the workshop topic. Presenters included district personnel, CSUN faculty, SPs, and others with expertise in special education and district policies. BTs and SPs could also attend the general education BTSA workshops offered at other times.
5. *Professional conferences and materials.* Stipends were provided to enable BTSA-SE teachers to pursue information or training in an area of interest or need, network

with special education colleagues in other districts, and purchase instructional materials.

Outcome Data

To examine program productivity and the efficacy of the induction model, data was collected from activities in which beginning teachers and support providers participated. The first component, individualized support, was investigated by summarizing the entries in the logs maintained by SPs of weekly contacts with BTs. These logs specified the frequency of contact, the topics of discussion, and the types of assistance given. An analysis of SPs' weekly logs indicated that the major topics discussed were: CFASST events (82%); legal requirements (27%); lesson planning, instruction, and selection of curricular material (27%); student assessment (26%); classroom management and student behavior issues (25%); school issues, e.g., budget, class size, safety (16%); BTSA-SE orientation, procedures, workshops (7%); and working with parents (6%). The second component, formative assessment of teaching practice, was also examined through an analysis of the weekly logs. As noted above, a high percentage of contact time between the SP and BT was spent on CFASST, including the planning, implementation, and reflection aspects of each CFASST event. Feedback comments indicated that participants perceived special education adaptations of CFASST were to be both relevant and useful.

Data regarding the remaining three program components were collected from a database that specified requests for professional release days, workshop attendance, and stipend reimbursement. Professional release days were requested by 42% of BTs. Workshops were attended by 80% of BTs; the majority (71%) attended 3 or more workshops, 10% attended all workshops, and 18% did not attend any, commonly citing family responsibilities and religious obligations on Saturday mornings. However, a relatively low number (27%) of BTs requested reimbursement for conference attendance fees, which may reflect the fact that most of the BTs were concurrently taking advanced courses towards their Professional Clear Education

TESE, Volume 27, No. 4
Fall 2004

Specialist (special education) credential. However, 48% of BTs requested reimbursement for instructional materials.

To assess participant satisfaction, BTs and SPs completed a program survey annually rating the five program components (1 = not valuable, 5 = very valuable) and the overall support provided by BTSA-SE. Program component ratings ranged from 3.4–4.9 for BTs and 3.6–4.8 for SPs, indicating high satisfaction and considerable consistency between BTs and SPs. All ratings averaged above 4.0 except for the CFASST assessment and support process (3.4 for BTs, 3.6 for SPs). Comments indicated that, while helpful, CFASST events were time consuming. One item, “support provided by support provider”, was rated differently by BTs (3.9) and SPs (4.5). The data indicated that while most BTs (78%) valued assistance from SPs, some did not, suggesting that some SPs may have been less effective than others in providing individualized support and may have needed additional training and oversight in assisting BTs.

A primary measure of program impact for BTSA-SE was teacher retention. Data for those who participated in the first three years of BTSA-SE indicated a retention rate of over 95%, suggesting that supports provided by the program contributed to the retention of participating special education teachers.

Discussion and Recommendations

Evaluation results indicate that BTs participated in a variety of BTSA-SE activities, and they valued program supports and professional development activities. SPs provided individualized support to new teachers that addressed the needs of beginning special educators, engaged new teachers in self-assessment using CFASST adapted materials, and participated in professional development activities with BTs. Few BTSA-SE participants left the teaching field in the first three years of teaching, suggesting that the induction program contributed to teacher retention. Much of the success and accomplishments of BTSA-SE reflect the support provided for new special educators, the statewide effort to support and allocate funding to induction programs, and the close collabora-

tion with participating districts and the university.

Supporting New Special Educators

New special education teachers often work with challenging students in challenging settings, are overwhelmed by paperwork, and receive little support from school personnel and colleagues, who may have even less preparation or experience in special education than they do. The BTSA-SE program showed that support providers who have experience in urban schools and in the disability area of the BTs had the critical expertise to respond to BTs' needs. The training and professional development BTSA-SE provided to SPs on mentoring techniques and communication skills further enriched their expertise. Adapting the induction materials for special educators made the CFASST process a more valuable tool for fostering BT development and reflection. Workshops and other professional development activities provided collegial support in addition to new knowledge and skills. These BTs and their SPs expressed appreciation for the variety of support and professional development activities. BTs often referred to the BTSA-SE program as a “life-line” in the challenging settings in which they worked.

Collaboration With State, District, and University Personnel

The state spearheaded the implementation of induction programs, providing significant funding and offering training and assessment activities for program directors. Districts worked closely with BTSA-SE faculty, assisting with recruitment and training efforts. Recruitment included mass mailings to school principals, presentations at district special education meetings, and “word-of-mouth” from SPs and BTSA-SE teachers, as well as flyers, a brochure, a newsletter and ongoing communication with principals and district directors of special education. District personnel also served as support providers and workshop leaders. Finally, faculty at CSUN were involved in the professional development of new teachers and their involvement also benefited the special education credential programs. The BTSA-SE activities

Induction Program
Kennedy & Burnstein

informed preservice practices and created a cadre of SPs, who were then hired to teach and supervise in the CSUN special education preservice program.

The outcomes of BTSA-SE suggest that an effective induction model should: 1) address the unique needs of beginning special education teachers, recognizing that they benefit from support personnel with expertise in policies and practices related to students with disabilities; 2) design and implement a comprehensive program that provides multiple supports including individualized and collegial assistance and professional development activities; and 3) facilitate collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including those at state, regional and local levels. Although development and implementation can be time-intensive and costly, a comprehensive and effective induction program provides critical support to beginning special educators and contributes to the retention, sta-

bility and competence of the special education teaching force.

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