

# Recruitment and Retention of Rural Special Educators

## Abstract



## Introduction

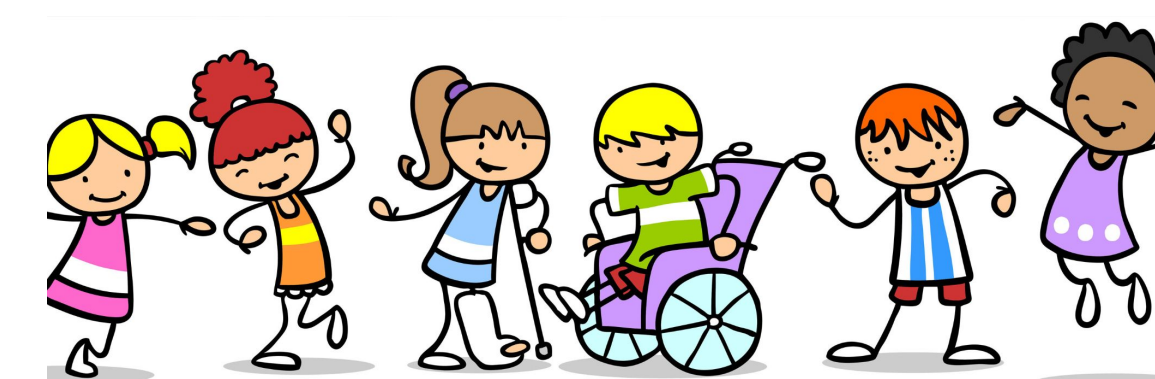
- 15% of special education teachers leave their profession after 5 years
- 48 states reported special education teacher shortages
- Turnover rates for special educators (12%) is 2X the rate of general education teachers
- Rural school issues:
  - Personal, professional, geographic isolation
  - Smaller number of special educators in the district → greater responsibilities and expanded roles
  - Less access to resources and enhanced professional development
- High demands contributing to teacher burnout

### Research Question:

Our research has examined and brought to light two questions:

1. What are some causes for the severe lack of recruitment and retention of qualified special educators?
2. What are schools doing currently and how can they prepare and retain qualified teachers?

## Results (Causes)



### 1. Geographic isolation

- Less access to professional development due to driving farther distances to visit host universities
- Less connection/support opportunities from other special educators professionally (creating student IEPs) and personally (maintaining teacher emotional health and motivation)

### 2. Over-expanded roles

- Over-relied upon for special education experience
  - Acting not just as teachers, but as advisors, often responsible for explaining to administration and fellow teachers the intricacies of special education
- Roles drawing them away from students
  - SPED teachers only spend 37% of their time instructing students with disabilities, the rest of their time is filled with paperwork and managing paraprofessionals

### 3. Negative emotional mindsets

- Lack of self-confidence due to inadequate preparation
  - 28% felt that many services were “beyond the scope of their certification”
- Emotional exhaustion has been linked as the #1 contributor to special education burnout
  - Burnout is stable throughout the year
- Affects their students’ overall experience and outcomes, for example if there is high turnover rate for staff

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## Results (Solutions)



### 1. Pre-service Teacher Exposure

- 87% students pursuing special education degrees had previous experience; increases confidence and knowledge
- Offers of peer tutoring, summer programs, and future teacher conferences
- Colleges can offer classes with service learning aspects
  - Education majors can graduate with General Education and Special Education licenses
- Alternative Pathways, such as Troops to Teachers and field-based teacher residencies

### 2. Increase Mentoring for In-Service Teachers

- Job Satisfaction increases as teachers feel supported, more confident, and less alone creating lasting personal relationships with interactive teaming.
- Quality and preparation of teachers
  - 2:1 mentor-to-mentee ratio allowed for 100% of the participants to gain a special education endorsement
  - Increased opportunities involving in research-based practices and educational reform

### 3. Increase Professional Development

- Administration should have higher self efficacy to cover roles special educators are tasked with
- Mindfulness Skills Training, such as nonjudging, accepting thoughts and emotions, “acting with awareness” during activities, and expressing experiences in words, lowers burnout rate
- Teachers should be provided with specified professional development opportunities in which they requested.

### 4. Emphasize Community Connections

- Schools like teacher applicants to be from the area; applicants look for jobs close to high school and/or college
- Teachers have “dual roles” as being respected individuals in the classroom and community

“We are a lot of people wearing a lot of different hats.”

– Bon, High School Teacher, Riverbend, WI

“I met a girl named Abbie. Once I met her I knew I had to work with people like her for the rest of my life.”

– A student from the Teacher Cadet Program

## Discussion / Recommendations

- Ensure all personnel in schools are familiar with special education
- Expose students to special education (Special Olympics, peer tutoring, classmates) while in school
  - Increase all students’ familiarity with it, respect for all individuals, and chances they may want to work in this field
- Provide effective professional development about best up-to-date practices
- Rural schools should be able to critically analyze issues, and have the resources and confidence to pivot and make needed changes
- Offer mindfulness practices, meditation, and professional development opportunities for teachers to build emotional resilience
  - Recognize burnout
  - Remember that burnout affects students!
- Build a strong community and support by reminding teachers they’re not alone, and creating comfortability by asking for assistance.
- Universities (with vast amounts of resources and opportunities) should reach out to rural schools to create positive partnerships
  - Schools get high quality Evidence-Based Practices implemented, and universities get robust current data
- Calls for further research:
  - What are some unique factors facing rural schools in Montana?
  - What are some unique factors facing rural tribal schools?
  - How to make professional development effective?
  - How to encourage teachers to consistently integrate mindfulness practices?



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