

Preface

Why do so many special educators leave their positions each year? How can we reduce attrition? I have asked these questions over the last twenty-five years in my work as a special education administrator and as a university faculty member. Some teacher attrition is natural and positive. New teachers can bring innovative ideas and help others look at things in new ways. It is also best for those not suited for teaching careers to leave. However, each year many special education teachers who entered the field with a great deal of enthusiasm leave because of poor working conditions and inadequate supports. Some stay in their schools, but transfer to general education positions. A higher percentage of special educators leave than any group of general educators, including math and science teachers. Replacing these teachers is disruptive for schools and a challenging problem in an era of teacher shortage.

Specific problems in special educators' work lives contribute to attrition. Some of these problems are obvious, such as the extensive bureaucratic and legal requirements of special education teaching. Others are more subtle and reflect the differences between special and general education teacher cultures and feelings of isolation. Lack of administrative support is an attrition factor that is emphasized in many special education studies.

As a former special education supervisor, I worked with many principals across elementary and secondary schools. Principals, perhaps more than any other school personnel, influence whether special educators want to stay in their schools. The work that principals do as leaders influences the climate for special education in the school, whether teachers have opportunities to collaborate, and how well they are able to address students' needs.

Most principals are caring and motivated individuals who want to support teachers and foster student learning. Yet, many principals find dealing with special education a daunting task, fraught with legal mine fields. School leaders have numerous questions about the discipline of

students with disabilities, how to make sure compliance issues are addressed, and how to avoid the next due process hearing. So, it's no surprise that the support of special education teachers isn't always a top concern.

Many school leaders have had no systematic preparation to prepare them to create effective educational environments for students with disabilities. Often school leaders are left to learn many aspects of special education on their own. When principals do provide assistance, it is often focused on the legal aspects of special education, rather than how to foster special educators' professional growth or address the needs of students with disabilities. High demands on principals' time, coupled with the problems inherent in administering special education programs, makes for a frustrating experience.

Leaders have asked me numerous questions about special education teacher attrition over the years. For example: "Why are special education teachers leaving in droves?" "What do special educators mean by the lack of administrative support?" and "What can we do to have some stability in special education?"

Principals can do a great deal to retain special educators. These teachers indicate that a supportive principal is the *number one* incentive for staying in special education. Numerous studies show that teachers who perceive their principals as supportive experience higher job satisfaction, greater commitment, more colleague support, fewer work problems, and less stress and burnout than those who are not supported.

This book provides a framework and specific guidelines for increasing special education teacher retention. The central premise of this book is that when principals work to create school environments in which special educators feel supported and can use their expertise to help students with disabilities achieve, they are also creating the conditions that facilitate teacher satisfaction, commitment, and retention. Some of the recommendations presented in this book take considerable effort and thought. Others are relatively simple and can be implemented immediately. The guidelines presented in this book are part of what the best leaders do—"great school leaders create nurturing school environments in which accomplished teaching can flourish and grow" (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 3).

Cultivating and keeping committed special educators is also an important responsibility of district leaders. Principals cannot do all of the work by themselves. Many of the ideas presented in this book can be considered from a school or district perspective. For example, both principals and school leaders need to share responsibility for recruiting, hiring, inducting, and providing effective professional development.

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District administrators are often in a better position than principals to communicate with state departments of education to consider specifically how state leadership can support school and district efforts. Specifically, the state Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) supports the recruitment, retention, and professional growth of teachers. State leadership can also help with regulating special educators' caseloads, reducing the bureaucratic demands on teachers, and supporting special education teacher induction.

PURPOSES AND GOALS OF THIS BOOK

The primary purpose of this book is to help school and district leaders understand the factors that influence attrition as well as what they can do to retain special education teachers. This book provides specific recommendations for developing highly qualified special educators and providing the conditions in which they can succeed and grow professionally. Although this book is written with the special education teacher in mind, some of the recommendations apply to general educators as well.

More specifically, this book provides:

1. A broad framework that leaders can use to see the “big picture” of teacher retention,
2. A perspective of the specific work problems that lead special educators to resign, and
3. Specific guidelines to improve special educators' retention.

AUDIENCES FOR THIS BOOK

This book is appropriate for several audiences: leaders, mentors, and faculty members. Each of these groups has a stake in improving teacher quality and helping special educators develop satisfying work lives. Thus, the following audiences will find this book helpful:

- **Principals and Assistant Principals:** School leaders are in a key position to facilitate special education teacher retention. They are critical to the creation of a positive school climate for all teachers and students, and set the tone for how students with disabilities are served in schools.

- **District Leaders:** District personnel, such as directors, supervisors, and coordinators of special education, are in an important position to assess teacher needs across the district. Without careful coordination and planning between school and district leaders, critical leadership tasks may be overlooked.
- **Mentors and Teacher Leaders:** Mentors and teacher leaders will develop a better understanding of the needs of beginning teachers, how roles can be clarified, and how to help new teachers reduce their stress levels. They will also develop an understanding of effective leadership in special education and acquire an understanding of how to facilitate the professional development of others.
- **Human Resources Administrators:** The material on recruiting and hiring, teacher induction, stress management, and systematic planning efforts to understand and reduce district attrition should be relevant to these leaders.
- **Faculty in Colleges and Universities:** College and university professors searching for a text on the school and district leaders' roles in improving special education practices can use this book as supplementary text in educational leadership.
- **Leaders in State Departments of Education and Union Leaders:** There is a role to be played by state departments of education and unions in supporting teachers and promoting wellness. For example, induction programs, work assignments, and teacher wellness can be promoted by these groups. The CSPD that is part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) can provide districts with resources to implement some of the strategies identified in this book.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Part I of the book addresses understanding special education teacher attrition and retention. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and provides a Leader's Framework for Cultivating and Keeping Special Education Teachers. Figure 1.1 provides a visual organizer for the chapters that follow. The second chapter briefly reviews the growing literature on special education attrition and summarizes the research findings in a table. In particular, Chapter 2 provides a picture of what contributes to special educators' feelings of being unsupported and overwhelmed in their schools.

Part II of the book addresses finding and cultivating high-quality special educators. Chapters 3–5 consider how to increase the quantity and quality of special education teachers in schools in ways that will

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increase their likelihood of staying. The basic premise underlying these chapters is that well-qualified teachers who have the expertise needed for their work and who are well matched to their positions will be more likely to stay.

Part III addresses how to create positive work environments. Chapters 6–8 provide specific recommendations for improving teachers' work conditions and decreasing teacher stress. Finally, Chapter 9 outlines a process that leaders can use to assess what is contributing to attrition in their districts and a strategic planning process to improve these conditions.

Part IV provides numerous resources and specific assessments that leaders can use to better understand the local conditions that influence teacher attrition.

Following Chapter 1, each chapter uses the following format:

- Brief introduction and scenario,
- Chapter overview,
- A brief link between chapter topic and what we know about teacher attrition and retention,
- Primary content of the chapter,
- Tips for leaders,
- A bulleted summary of major chapter themes, and
- Selected readings and Web sites.

A feedback form is provided at the end of the book. I am interested in your ideas, comments, and suggestions (bbilling@vt.edu).