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# Mentors Increasing Special Education Retention

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## **Abstract**

Lack of effective professional mentoring and minimal ongoing support programs have been suggested as two primary contributors to the chronic shortages of special education teachers. Few programs have been designed to address these specific causes. In this article we describe TATERS, a partnership between a university special educator preparation program, a state Department of Education, and district level administrations designed to (a) develop effective mentoring systems, and (b) strengthen training and recruitment of preservice and new special education teachers, especially in rural areas.

## **Introduction**

Providing special education services to students with exceptionalities is riddled with issues. These issues are complex among various demographic and geographic locations in the U.S. In this article, we will identify some of these issues and describe a new and unique program. This program is intended to remedy the lack of strong mentoring and induction programs by instructing future special education mentors and developing collaborative relationships between local education agencies (LEA), state departments of education (SDE) and institutions of higher education (IHE).

Critical shortages of special education teachers exist in many areas of the nation. In 2006 the U.S. Department of Education reported a child count of over 4.5 million K-12 students with high incidence disabilities (i.e., specific learning disability, mental retardation, emotional disturbance) (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Unfortunately, at present over 40,000 special educators are less than fully certified for their professional roles. This group is providing special education services to approximately 800,000 students with disabilities, the overwhelming majority of whom are diagnosed with high incidence disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

At best estimate, 25-30% of all students in the U.S. attend school in rural areas with nearly half of all public schools in the U.S. categorized as rural schools (National Education Association, 2004; Reeves 2003). Shortages of qualified special educators are especially pronounced in these rural areas (Menlove & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2004). Rural districts may experience attrition rates in excess of 30%, and many experience a 100% staff turnover within three years (Williams, Martin & Hess, 2002).

Idaho is one of the most rural states in the nation, with 39% of Idaho school districts having student enrollments of 500 or less. Thus students with disabilities in Idaho schools are more likely to be in rural areas, and thus more likely to be served by a less than fully certified special educator. Special education teacher positions have been one of the most difficult to fill in the state of Idaho for the last five years, with more than

10% of special educators in Idaho not fully certified (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Rural districts in Idaho face additional challenges due in part to frequent geographical isolation, which presents the dual difficulties of (a) initially finding and recruiting personnel, and (b) then providing ongoing professional development and support to help retain practicing special educators (Purcell, East, & Rude, 2005).

The teacher retention component may be especially significant. In Idaho, for example, special educators leave their position after an average of 3 years. Rural districts have an average of 10% yearly staff turnover rates (State of Idaho, 2007).

What drives new teachers from the field so quickly? Surveys of new teachers consistently indicate they feel a lack of support, are overwhelmed by administrative requirements, or simply do not feel prepared for the demands of the job (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble & Johnson, 2007). Thus any program designed to alleviate the shortage must substantially attend to these issues.

Strong induction and mentoring programs are effective strategies for reducing attrition in special educators (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003). These programs work best when the mentor and new teacher work in the same community, and when they share similar job descriptions and responsibilities. In rural communities however, it is not always feasible to connect mentors with new teachers physically. E-mentoring using computer-based technologies (e.g., email, web sites) is an emerging form of mentorship that can bridge geographic isolation, and has been demonstrated to be an effective form of mentoring (Garcis & Nussbaum-Beach, 2007). In addition, teacher preparation programs at universities that develop partnerships with rural schools can include the development and implementation of mentoring systems to promote a greater sense of unity, empowerment and responsibility among novice educators (Warren & Peel, 2000).

### **Constructing a mentor network**

Why does mentoring help to keep people in the teaching field? One possible explanation is provided in the How People Learn (HPL) approach (Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino, 1999). This work conceptualizes a model of teaching and learning that includes: (a) a focus on understanding the individual needs of the learner; (b) articulation of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes successful teacher candidates need to acquire; (c) assessment of novice learning to guide subsequent mentoring; and (d) development of a professional community of practice to support learning both during the program and in professional practice. In the HPL framework, the development of the professional learning community is as critical as acquiring the knowledge and skills required in a preservice program.

Using this model as a conceptual starting point, we sought to strengthen the state's professional learning community of special educators through two interrelated strategies. First, the university structured a preservice special educator preparation program targeting rural areas based on a cohort model. Working together from the earliest stages of their programs, pre-service teacher candidates develop an inherent camaraderie as they progress through the program together.

Second, we simultaneously developed a statewide network of mentors to supervise field experiences of these emerging novice special educators to provide a systematic and high quality induction programs as these preservice candidates enter the special education field. These approaches are supported by a strong collaboration with the state department of education. Strong collaboration among universities, state departments of education, and local education agencies offer the promise of significant improvements in the quality of teacher preparation programs, especially those programs relying on such alternative models of service delivery as online coursework (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2003).

Simply connecting novice special educators with more experienced colleagues and expecting positive results is unlikely to significantly impact long term retention. In order to effectively develop a professional learning community, mentors need mentoring (Zimpher & Rieger, 1988). The extant research to date has clearly suggested that training mentors results in more effective induction programs (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003).

Additionally, when university teacher preparation programs are coupled with school building-based mentor support, the teacher preparation programs are more successful in preparing special educators (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2003). Therefore we targeted three specific areas as a part of the mentor teacher component of the program described in this paper:

1. deep content knowledge in the fields of reading, mathematics and writing;
2. expertise in pedagogical knowledge, including instructional design and the integration of evidence-based practices in teaching; and
3. leadership training, including effective strategies for mentoring and coaching new teachers.

The mentor program component additionally focuses on contemporary best practices related to effective mentoring and induction for new teachers, specifically highlighting (a) reflective practice, (b) preparing personal professional development goals and plans, (c) problem solving, and (d) effective communication. The Idaho State Department of Education (ISDE) provides ancillary support for the mentor program through sponsorship of mentor teachers in state professional organizations, and by arranging annual meetings to discuss updates in state policy, procedure and practice. Substantial collaboration between university teacher preparation programs and mentor teachers results in an increased sense of accountability for mentors, and more comprehensive development of professional learning communities (Carroll, 2006).

### **Benefits to mentor teachers**

Although the primary focus of the mentoring program is on the quality and retention of is to entry-level special educators, a secondary goal is to increase the number of current special education teachers who (a) meet the NCLB requirements for highly qualified, and (b) enter into and complete graduate programs in special education.

In order to help novice special educators achieve the highly qualified requirements, mentoring teachers must assume substantial roles in the production of these future colleagues. Perhaps the first step in this process is for the mentoring special education teachers to shift their own self-perceptions within the profession. The experience of supporting new teachers can be a transformative one in which mentoring teachers

progress to view the mentoring experience not as an extra job duty, but as an affirmation of themselves being experts in the field of special education (Mezirow, 1991).

This acknowledgement of self-expertise is coupled with identified attributes. These attributes include (a) being comfortable with being viewed as experts by their peers, (b) being self-aware of one's own teaching practices, and (c) being willing to extend their responsibilities to include working with new colleagues (Borko, 1986; Galvez-Hjornevik, 1986; Varah, Theune, & Parker, 1986). As these mentoring teachers develop their professional self-concepts to include seeing themselves as experts in the field of special education, they not only make progress towards the highly qualified requirements themselves, but become better able to support new special educators striving to meet these same requirements.

Over the past year, Boise State University's (BSU) Department of Special Education and Early Childhood Studies has been working towards bridging the gap between pre-service and new special education teachers and their associated mentor teachers with a new program, Technology Accentuated Transformative Education of Rural Specialist (TATERS). The goals of this program are twofold.

First, TATERS seeks to support rural districts in building capacity for strong mentorship and induction programs. The second goal is to prepare highly qualified special education teachers to begin and continue their careers in rural areas. The bridges this program seeks to provide between new teachers and experienced mentors, coupled with an online delivery of pre-service and in-service training for both groups, should assist in attracting and retaining qualified special educators in all geographical areas.

TATERS is now in its early stages of implementation. The first phase of this program, carried out during the 2008-2009 academic year, established initial working partnerships with the ISDE, and with the local districts in the area. Next, over the summer of 2009 project personnel, in conjunction with the IDSE, will develop a consulting teacher endorsement program for future mentors. Finally, in the fall of 2009 project personnel will have developed and implemented an online special education teacher preparation program. The initial group of future mentoring special educators will have completed the program May 2010. The first cohort of novice special educators will be completing the online program in May 2011.

### **Conclusion**

Providing special education services to students with exceptionalities has historically presented challenges to LEAs, SDEs and IHEs; challenges that are exacerbated in geographically isolated and rural areas. These challenges are met with innovative solutions and collaborative efforts from all levels of special education: schools, governing agencies and preparation programs. TATERS is multi-faceted solution geared towards instructing experienced special education teachers to become mentors to new and preservice teachers. These mentor teachers will strengthen preservice and induction programs in an attempt to increase special education teacher recruitment and retention in all areas regardless of community demographics or geographical locations. Instead of relying on professionals coming to the resources, the IHE and SDE are bringing the resources to the professional.

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