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Online Learning and Mentors: Addressing the Shortage of Rural Special Educators Through Technology and Collaboration

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Abstract

This article describes a promising model in comprehensive special education personnel preparation to support the recruitment and retention of special education teachers in rural areas. The approach draws on several bodies of research to include best practices for teacher education, online service delivery, collaboration among key stakeholders, and the development of strong mentoring and induction programs. The implementation plan, based on evidence-based practice in special education and online learning, is presented. A key element of this plan is developing and maintaining strong relationships among rural districts, the state department of education, and higher education.

There are several significant challenges associated with attracting and retaining qualified special educators in rural areas. These challenges include: (a) ongoing critical shortages of special education teachers, (b) increased demands relative to the "highly qualified" requirements of NCLB, (c) an increasingly diverse student population, (d) lack of strong mentor teachers to adequately support the preparation of pre-service and new special educators, and (e) geographical isolation that limits the opportunities for professional development, recruitment, and improvement (Menlove & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2004). Potential solutions for each of these challenges can be found in the existing literature; yet complex issues require complex solutions.

Approaches that address a single aspect of a problem may be ineffective because they ignore the larger context. In this article, we outline a multi-faceted approach to an alternate route to certification in special education for people living in rural Idaho. This approach draws from disparate sources of best practice to create a comprehensive solution to increase the number of qualified special educators in rural areas. We first elaborate on the issues that make preparing, recruiting, and retaining special educators in rural areas difficult, and then provide an overview of a promising model to improving special education personnel preparation that is based on best practices described in the research. Finally, we conclude with a description of our implementation plan.

Challenges

Critical shortages of special education teachers exist in many areas of the nation but are especially pronounced in rural areas (Menlove & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2004) where filling positions is problematic. At best estimate, 25-30% of all students in the U.S. attend school in an area that is categorized as rural and nearly

half of all public schools in the U.S. are categorized as rural schools (National Education Association, 2004; Reeves 2003). Rural districts have yearly attrition rates in excess of 30% and may experience a 100% staff turnover within 3 years (Williams, Martin, & Hess, 2002).

Idaho is one of the most rural states in the nation; 62 of 114 school districts have populations of less than 1,000 students. At 15.6 people per square mile, Idaho's population density is significantly lower than the national average of 79.6 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Access to Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) is problematic in many areas of the state as evidenced by Idaho's low percentage (<25%) of the population with a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Students with disabilities in Idaho schools are more likely to be served by a special education teacher working under provisional licensure. Special education teacher positions have been one of the most difficult to fill with qualified teachers in the state of Idaho for the last 5 years (State of Idaho, 2007), and more than 10% of special educators in Idaho are not fully certified (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Typically, rural districts in Idaho also face the challenge of geographical isolation, which presents difficulties in finding personnel and providing professional development for practicing special educators (Purcell, East, & Rude, 2005). Recent federal legislation dealing with teacher preparation has magnified the challenges.

The requirements for professional certification have changed dramatically with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) and the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004). Specifically, IDEA 2004 requires special educators to hold a bachelors degree and obtain full state certification as a special education teacher or to pass the

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state special education teacher licensing examination (H.R. 1350 Section 602 [10][B][i]). Highly qualified special education teachers must not have had their certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis. In a Council for Administrators of Special Education (CASE) on-line survey of local and rural school administrators, 66.5% reported having difficulty in meeting the requirements of NCLB due to the definition of highly qualified special education teachers (Purcell, 2004). Schools in rural areas face additional obstacles meeting NCLB requirements due to their small size, geographic isolation, difficulties in recruitment, low retention, and because teachers commonly instruct in more than one subject (Richard, 2003; U.S. Government Accountability Office [USGAO], 2004). Thus, given the context of rural Idaho, the demands of NCLB/IDEA 2004 significantly contribute to the shortage of rural special educators.

Another concern of rural districts is the growing numbers of students with disabilities who come from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Idaho, like many states in the nation, has seen an increasing shift in student demographics over the last 10 years but not a comparable shift in teacher demographics. Based on demographic information reported by the Idaho Department of Education (IDE; State of Idaho, 2007), for example, the population of Hispanic students rose from 8% of total student population in 1996 to 14% of the student population in 2006. In Idaho, the population of Hispanic students tends to be concentrated in rural areas due to agriculture and migrant work patterns. There has been no significant increase in the number of Hispanic teachers; it has remained at 1% over the last 10 years. This demographic shift requires special educators to be well-versed in strategies that are successful in meeting the needs of students with high incidence disabilities who are English language learners.

However, inducting teachers into the field of special education is only one aspect of the dilemma. Generally, teacher retention rates are low, and this is especially true in special education. In Idaho, for example, special educators typically leave their position after 3 years, and rural districts have a yearly average of 10% special education staff turnover rates (State of Idaho, 2007). High attrition rates contribute to the difficulty of attracting and preparing new teachers. High attrition rates have other long-term negative consequences. For example, when an IHE's efforts must remain primarily focused on initial teacher certification, there are insufficient resources to advance the profession through the development of strong graduate and professional development training programs.

In addition, systemic changes in service delivery are presenting new challenges to personnel preparation as

well as retention. Idaho has embraced a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework of service delivery. This will require special educators to understand tiered models of service delivery and be equipped to provide interventions and support to students with high incidence disabilities who have not been successful in the general classroom. Special educators (both entry-level and mentor teachers) must therefore understand how to: (a) work across the spectrum of service delivery options, (b) collaborate with the general education teachers, (c) implement and evaluate assessments that inform instruction, (d) implement positive behavior intervention and support, and (e) devise and deliver effective learning strategies. This is especially true in the academic areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Finally, although RtI is generally seen as a school-wide reform, special education teachers are often assigned primary responsibility and/or leadership roles for implementation (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). This necessitates that special educators remain current on best practices and research; yet opportunities for professional development in rural areas typically are quite limited.

Multi-faceted Solutions

Each hardship described above is not lacking a technical, evidence-supported solution. Like many problems in education however, the difficulty of reducing shortages of special educators in rural areas requires multi-faceted solutions. In order to more fully address the unique challenges of rural special education, a multi-faceted approach that integrates best practices is needed in order to affect change. In summary, this review of the status of rural special education in Idaho, in conjunction with an internal review of current personnel preparation program at Boise State University (BSU), highlights the need for a program that will:

1. Prepare special education teachers to work in Idaho who meet the requirements of highly qualified under the IDEA 2004 regulations and are well prepared to serve children with high incidence disabilities,
2. Integrate extended field experiences and build capacity for ongoing high quality mentoring and induction in rural areas,
3. Ensure that the preparation program addresses issues of diversity and the specific needs of English language learners with high incidence disabilities, and
4. Provide flexible options to increase access for candidates from rural areas, especially those with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

In order to meet these goals, we are implementing a 5-year U. S. Department of Education personnel preparation grant, TATERS (Technology Accentuated

Transformative Education for Rural Specialists), in collaboration with the IDE. The model of teacher preparation described by Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005) is the basis for this program. TATERS is guided by the characteristics outlined by Brownell, Ross, Colon, and McCallum (2005) as critical features of effective teacher preparation programs as well. These critical features include: (a) a common and coherent vision of teaching and learning, (b) common and related strategies across courses, (c) integrated clinical experience with coursework, and (d) revisiting 'big ideas' continuously throughout the program.

TATERS incorporates these features through a multi-pronged approach to developing a strong professional collaboration across the IHE, IDE, and rural school districts (LEAs). The three main elements to this approach are (a) the use of an online cohort model so that teacher candidates progress through the program together, (b) the development of a statewide network of mentors to supervise field experiences which will increase the capacity for higher quality induction programs as entry-level teachers enter the special education field, and (c) a realignment of coursework with tiered models of service delivery so that initial certification candidates are continually exposed to the integration of instruction, intervention, and assessment. Additionally, TATERS is collaborating with the IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University, the National Center on RtI, and other groups to enhance the training of rural candidates, as well as to attract teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Alternative models of teacher preparation delivery have been suggested as a promising approach to fill critical shortages in rural areas, and community mentoring systems offer teacher candidates access to resources that are immediately available to the educational facilities, communities, and students in which they serve (Hardman, Rosenberg, & Sindelar, 2005; Jung, Galyon Keramidas, Collins, & Ludlow, 2006). Programs, such as TATERS, that can be delivered remotely to candidates who are invested in both their communities and in teaching as a career offer one possibility to improve the status of special education in rural settings by attracting and retaining qualified special educators (Hardman et al., 2005).

Next Steps for Implementation.

The plans to revise BSU's existing program are not especially innovative when considered in isolation. What is new is the comprehensiveness of the revision, especially the focus on developing stronger relationships among the IHE, IDE, and LEAs to train and include mentor teachers as an integral component of our teacher education program. The initial steps for implementation are outlined below.

Revising courses to reflect current best practice and to

be delivered online. Following the recommendations for best practice in tiered service delivery models (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Mellard & Johnson, 2008), coursework on academic and behavioral skill instruction for preservice candidates follows a consistent format: (a) the theoretical underpinnings of the construct and its component processes, (b) evidence-based instructional practices that have been demonstrated to be effective for most learners, (c) procedures to screen for students at-risk, (d) interventions that support students with diverse learning needs, and (e) progress monitoring tools and related assessments that inform teacher practice. A tiered model of service delivery has been demonstrated to be effective for students with disabilities and especially for those from diverse cultural and language backgrounds (see, for example, *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice Special Series: Reading Risk and Intervention for Young English Learners*, Gerber & Durgunoglu, 2004).

In addition to revising course content, BSU is developing courses that will be delivered entirely online to a rural cohort group. Providing an online special education teacher certification program offers effective instruction to qualified candidates and increases the ability for rural schools to offer special education services to their students (Canter, Voytecki & Rodriguez, 2007). Alternative models of teacher preparation delivery have been suggested as a promising approach to fill critical shortages in rural areas (Hardman et al., 2005). The advantages to developing distance delivery program options are the facilitation of multiple communities of learning and the potential to maximize the number of students served, especially for students in rural areas (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Jung et al., 2006). This suggests one possible reason why special education online preparation programs have experienced such rapid growth in the last few years (Jung et al, 2006; Ludlow, Conner & Schechter, 2005).

Integrating strong field experiences throughout the teacher preparation program. The revised BSU program integrates field experience throughout the courses so that teacher candidates have increased opportunity for guided experiential learning. Collaboration through the mentor teacher network makes this possible. By increasing and enriching the number of field experiences, teacher candidates have an opportunity to connect theory to practice, to make connections across courses, and to develop reflective and analytical skills that are required for effective service delivery. BSU plans to connect field experiences to course content to help teacher candidates understand how theory and research are applied to a practical setting. Through the use of these integrated field experiences, teacher candidates will be prepared to use both clinical judgment and external evidence to serve their students.

By integrating field experiences with evidence-based practices in coursework and with effective mentoring, the BSU program increases the likelihood that our entry level rural special educators will be on their way to developing professional wisdom (Whitehurst, 2002). The rural cohort group will complete the coursework and student teaching requirements for the Idaho K-12 Generalist Certification in Special Education in 2 years.

Collaborating with the state and local districts to identify and train mentor teachers. Strong collaboration among IHEs, state departments of education, and local education agencies (LEAs) significantly improves the quality of teacher preparation programs, especially those relying on alternative models of service delivery, such as online coursework (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2003). Therefore, another significant change to the BSU program includes a stronger collaboration between BSU, the IDE, and rural LEAs. Strong collaborative relationships are important for increasing the quality of special education services to students with disabilities in Idaho and are especially critical when working across geographically isolated rural areas. Research suggests that training mentors can result in more effective induction programs (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003). Additionally, when a program couples IHE oversight with building-based mentor support, teacher preparation programs are more successful in preparing special educators (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2003).

At the state level, Idaho is refining an existing state model for developing a strong mentor network. The IDE recently examined the effectiveness of a program to prepare mentors for secondary transition services. Through this program, the IDE and local school districts increased compliance with IEP transition planning for students with disabilities from 17% to 63% (Jacqueline Hyatt, personal communication). The state model identified teachers who were already implementing elements of best practice for transition planning, and then the IDE provided training to develop those teachers to serve as mentors within their districts/regions on issues related to secondary transition. Building on this model, BSU works with the IDE to target specific schools and districts with the capacity to provide strong mentors. BSU will conduct the First Summer Academy on Mentoring June 22-26, 2009, to be followed with a 5-week online course for the first group of special education mentor teachers.

At the district level, BSU is identifying select districts interested in increasing their capacity to train mentor teachers and to identify potential teacher candidates. Three schools within Idaho were recently identified by the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) as model sites for implementation of RtI (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006). BSU will work closely with these districts to identify mentor teachers and best practices within their schools. LEAs also have unique access to information about their individual needs and populations that will assist BSU with recruitment efforts for the rural cohort group. For example, some districts may employ classified staff that hold a bachelor's degree but are not certified in special education (e.g., paraprofessional). Similarly, parents of students attending rural schools may hold an undergraduate degree but not certification. To the extent that it is logistically possible, the candidates in the BSU rural cohort group will live within districts where BSU also is working with a mentor teacher. This will enhance the integration of the teacher candidate's experience with online coursework and what they practice in their field experience.

Conclusions

The challenges to improving special education service delivery in rural areas are numerous and complex. Therefore, complex and multi-faceted approaches are required if there are improvements in outcomes for students with disabilities served in these areas. Within this article, several salient challenges have been enumerated and described. TATERS, which couples an online delivery model to a rural cohort group, mentorship support, and stronger collaborations between the IDE, an IHE, and local districts, addresses systemic issues via evidence-based best practices as described. Evaluation using a combination of formative and summative methods will be undertaken to determine the impact this approach has on increasing the effectiveness of highly qualified special education teachers in rural Idaho. States with similar concerns can follow the description of this program to develop similar models. It is anticipated that high tech and high touch, provided in the context of strong collaboration relationships, will lead to better services for rural students with disabilities.

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