

# **A National Issue: Analysis of Factors Influencing Special Education Teachers' Retention and Attrition in Texas Public Schools**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**The study examined factors associated with the retention and attrition of special education teachers in Texas public schools. Participants were special education teachers who left special education but who remained in the field of education. Campus administrative support, central office support, mentors and colleagues support, parental support and school climate were factors indicated in the literature that impacted the retention and attrition of *general* education teachers. This study was intended to determine if those same factors impacted the retention and attrition of *special* education teachers.**

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## **Introduction**

Teaching is a relatively large occupation- it represents 4% of the entire civilian workforce (Ingersoll, 2002). For at least two decades there has been a shortage of fully-certified special education teachers in the United States. Only recently has this shortage received significant attention from policy-makers at the national level (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004).

Policymakers and education leaders have become convinced that if they are going to make significant improvements in the quality of education, good special education teachers are critically important (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004). Effective teachers constitute a valuable human resource and their recruitment and retention should be one of the most important agenda items for school leaders (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to add to the body of research that helps to identify the reason for the mass exodus of special education teachers after three years. There is limited in-depth empirical information related to the retention of special educators and factors that influence them to remain in the field of education in general. In other words, special education teachers are not leaving education; they are leaving special education. A study was conducted to identify important factors that influence special education teachers to leave or remain in the field of *special education*.

The major question that drove the study was: How does support from campus administrators, central office administrators, mentors/colleagues, and parents as well as school climate factors affect special education teachers' decision to remain in the field of special education?

### **Problem**

Many campus administrators are faced with the difficult task of resolving the personnel shortage issue in special education. These campus administrators are perplexed about the large number of teachers who decide to leave the field of special education after three years. An even more difficult challenge for campus administrators in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be attracting, satisfying, and retaining teachers of students placed in special education programs, especially those students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. The low retention rates of special educators' forces school administrators to focus on developing strategies to retain them. What can be done in order to increase the retention rate of special educators? School leaders must focus on school climate and support for novice teachers during their first few years in the profession in order to build a committed and qualified teaching force (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Administrators should focus on creating work environments that sustain special educators' involvement and commitment (Billingsley, 2004). Special education teachers often teach in unfavorable conditions. For example, many special education teachers are placed in classrooms that are ill-equipped and have limited materials and supplies (Billingsley). These teachers are also overwhelmed with enormous amounts of paperwork, a myriad of legal and accountability issues, students of widely differing abilities, and students with serious emotional and behavioral problems (Whitaker, 2001).

Each year the number of teachers entering the workforce is increasing. However, it seems that teachers already in the workforce are leaving faster than they can be replaced. Steep attrition in the first few years of teaching is a long-standing problem

(Darling-Hammond, 2003). The first year of teaching is often described as a difficult year where the novice teacher transitions from being a student responsible for his/her own learning to being a teacher responsible for the learning of others (Whitaker, 2003). These novice teachers must recognize and develop the resources that will sustain them and increase their resilience as they enter the initial career stages of their profession (Bobek, 2002). The number of highly qualified and effective teachers who remain in the field of special education will determine the success of an entire generation of special education students. Special education students' success will be determined by the quality of instruction provided to them by competent teachers.

The need for good teachers and good teaching is unprecedented. America is experiencing a shortage of qualified individuals prepared to take on the challenges of the profession, particularly in the critical shortage area of special education (Certo & Fox, 2002). The field of education is devastated each year by the massive exodus of special educators. According to Whitaker (2001) the annual attrition rate for special education teachers has been estimated to be between 8% and 10% (as cited in Washburn-Moses, 2005). Only a small number of special educators remain in the field of education for five or more years.

Teacher attrition, combined with increasing student enrollments, and persistent teacher shortages in special education, can only mean that the number of well-trained, committed professionals available to provide high quality education to students with disabilities is distressingly insufficient (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Mounting personnel shortages can lead to poor quality programs for students who need them the most (Kaff, 2004). Issues dealing with the retention of special educators are reaching epidemic proportions. Given the status of special education teacher retention, the obvious question to be asked is: What should the field of special education do to attract and retain the best and brightest for teaching students with disabilities? (Mastropieri, 2001)

This problem is particularly troubling in Texas public schools. Many Texas schools are unable to retain special educators who remain in the field of education for three years or more. Mitchell and Arnold (2004) report that Texas is facing such serious teacher shortages because of increasing student enrollment coupled with decreasing rates in teacher retention. It is apparent that one of the most important challenges in the field of special education is developing a qualified workforce and creating work environments that sustain special educators' involvement and commitment (Billingsley, 2004).

School districts need to determine why their teachers are leaving if they hope to improve teacher retention (Mitchell & Arnold, 2004). School administrators are struggling to understand what programs they can implement that would reduce special educators' attrition rates. Teacher retention is important not just because of the difficulty of finding replacements, but also because of the impact on instruction for students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2004). The provision of a free and appropriate education (FAPE) to students with disabilities is dependent upon the retention of qualified special education teachers in the classroom (Miller, et al. 1999).

### **Design of the Study**

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used to complete the research thus making it a mixed method study. Quantitative data were collected using a survey and were analyzed through descriptive statistics. Participants completed a questionnaire, *Teachers' Retention and Attrition Factors Survey*, regarding factors that influence special education teachers' retention and attrition. In addition to descriptive statistics, a causal-comparative design was used. This method was used to compare the perceptions of special education teachers who remain in the field of special education and those special education teachers who have left the field of special education.

The independent variables for the study were special education teachers who remain and those who have left the field of special education but remain in education. The dependent variables were campus administrative support, district office support, school climate, mentors and colleagues support, parental support, and personal factors. Based on the review of literature the dependent variables are factors that influenced special education teachers to remain or leave the field of special education. The causal-comparative design provided a method by which a researcher can examine how specific independent variables were affected by dependent variables.

Qualitative research was used in order to record current and former special education teachers' views of what influenced their decisions to either remain or leave the field of special education. The qualitative component of the research collected data through personal interviews in order to determine factors associated with the retention and attrition of special education teachers in selected school districts.

### **Method**

#### **Research Questions**

The following quantitative research questions guided the study:

1. Are campus administrative support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?
2. Are central office support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?
3. Are mentor and colleague support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?
4. Are parental support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?
5. Are school climate factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?

The following qualitative research questions guided the study:

1. What do special education teachers who stay or leave special education describe as the most important factors that influence their decision to remain or leave special education?
2. What specific things are done to enhance the involvement and commitment of special education teachers who stay in the profession?

### Participants

For the quantitative portion, a total of 300 surveys were sent to participants who were employed by school districts located in a large southwestern US metropolitan area. Two hundred were sent to current special education teachers and 100 were sent to former special education teachers. One hundred eighty-two participants completed the survey and for a return rate of 60.7%.

Participants had one to three years of special education teaching experience in Texas public schools. Ten school districts with 5,000 or more students in grades K-5 were randomly selected.

Qualitative data gathered information from both current and former special education teachers which helped to determine which factors influenced decisions of special education teachers to either remain in or leave the field of special education. Twenty teachers were interviewed: 10 current special education teachers and 10 general education teachers who left the field of special education. They were asked to describe both positive and negative factors that impact special education teachers' decisions to either continue to teach special education students or to leave the field of special education. Two teachers from each district represented in the study were interviewed. Teachers selected in the interviews represented *current* special educators and *former* special educators.

### Instruments

A 55-item questionnaire, *Teachers' Retention and Attrition Factors Survey*, was created for use in this study to assess special educators' perceptions of factors thought to be associated with teachers' retention and attrition. Factors that were included in the questionnaire were based on the review of literature.

The factors were campus administrative support, district office support, school climate, mentors and colleagues support, parental support, and personal factors. The questionnaire was divided into six sections; with the first five sections representing the above factors and each having 10 response items. For the first five sections each item was scaled using a six-point Likert-type scale response format. The last section of the questionnaire contained an open ended question that asked, "Do you plan to be a special education teacher next year? What has influenced your decision?"

### **Pilot Study**

In order to ensure reliability, a pilot study was conducted. A stratified random sample of 32 special education teachers was drawn that included teachers from a district that was not included in the study, but who were similar to those in the study. Data gathered from special education teachers from the pilot study were utilized to adjust the questionnaire.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Content validity of the *Teachers' Retention and Attrition Factors Survey* was verified in that the 32 special education teachers in the pilot agreed that the items in each factor did measure the factors. These were factors that were chosen based on the review of literature that relate to teachers' retention and attrition.

Reliability is the degree to which scores obtained with an instrument are consistent measures of whatever the instrument measures. To help establish the internal consistency of the instrument Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each factor. These were as follows: campus administrative support factors .848, central office support factors .908, mentors and colleagues support factors .961, parental support factors .819, and school climate support factors .809. The Cronbach's alpha for the entire instrument was .959.

The qualitative portion of the questionnaire and follow-up interviews were analyzed and categorized according to the variables used during this study. Individual interviews were conducted to gather information from respondents. Coding of their responses included writing key descriptors in the margins. Data were classified into themes which allowed for the identification of emergent themes and patterns and also allowed for a systematic way to present the findings. The literature on the subject of retention factors helped to verify the emergent themes, thereby maintaining the integrity of this portion of the study. Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and trustworthiness of the qualitative process were ascertained by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

Statistical analyses include descriptive and inferential statistics. Specific variables that showed promise of being important determinants of the characteristics or behavior patterns were studied. Data were analyzed by describing and comparing the variables, or factors, that represent the phenomenon of retention and attrition of special education teachers. The criterion value of  $p \leq .05$  was used to determine whether differences in means were statistically significant. In addition, the effect size was also calculated for differences that were statistically significant.

The qualitative portion of the questionnaire and follow-up interviews were analyzed and categorized according to the quantitative variables used during this study. Coding of the responses included writing key descriptors in the margins. Data were

classified into themes to allow for the identification of emergent themes and patterns and also to allow for a systematic way to present the findings.

### Findings

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the five retention and attrition factors for the 94 current special education teachers' and the 38 former special education teachers who responded to the survey and who had the characteristics of interest. The table displays means and standard deviations for the five factors the survey measured.

Table 1

#### *Factors Contributing to Special Education Teacher Retention and Attrition*

	Employment Status	N	Mean	SD
Campus Administration	Current	94	43.12	10.57
	Former	38	38.37	13.23
Central Office	Current	94	37.55	10.83
	Former	38	34.66	10.14
Mentors/Colleagues	Current	94	41.50	15.02
	Former	38	31.82	16.25
Parental Support	Current	94	38.15	10.94
	Former	38	42.16	9.08
School Climate	Current	94	46.39	9.12
	Former	38	43.87	10.26

### Research Question One

Research question one asked: Are campus administrative support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics of the five retention and attrition factors for the 94 current special education teachers' and the 38 former special education teachers who responded to the survey and who had the characteristics of interest. The mean score for current special education teachers was statistically significantly higher than the mean score of former special education teachers. The effect size, that demonstrates the practical significance, was .45. An effect size of 0.33 or above is considered practically significant.

It is concluded that, there is a statistically significant difference in campus administrative support factors scores between current and former special education

teachers. In effect, special education teachers who stayed in the field reported more campus administrative support than those who left the field of special education.

Table 2

*Campus Administration Support Factors t-test*

		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Effect Size
Campus Administration	Equal variances assumed	2.168	130	.032	4.75	0.45

\* $p \leq .05$

### Research Question Two

The second research question asked: Are central office support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?

Table 3 shows the comparison between current and former special education teachers' perceptions of the support provided by their central office administration. Both current and former special education teachers felt they did not receive support from their district office. The mean for current special education teachers was higher than former special education teachers. Since the standard deviation for the two groups are approximately equal the equal variance students-t was used. The t-test indicated that the difference of 2.89 was not statistically significant.

Table 3

*Central Office Support Factors t-test*

		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference
Central Office	Equal variances assumed	1.415	130	.159	2.89

\* $p \leq .05$

### Research Question Three

The third research question asked: Are mentors and colleagues support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?



Table 4 shows the difference in mentors and colleagues scores between current and former special education teachers. Current special educators' mean was 41.50 for mentors and colleagues support and former special education teachers' mean in this category was 31.82 for a difference of 9.68.

The mean for current special education teachers was higher than the mean of former special education teachers. The effect size was .64 demonstrating that this difference was practically significant. On the basis of these results, it was concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in mentors and colleagues support factors scores between current and former special educators. In effect, special education teachers who stay in the field of special education profession were more likely to have obtained support from mentors and colleagues.

Table 4

*Mentors and Colleagues Support Factors t-test*

		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Effect Size
Mentors and Colleagues	Equal variances assumed	3.262	130	.001	9.68	0.64

\* $p \leq .05$

**Research Question Four**

Research question four asked: Are parental support factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?

Table 5 shows parental support factors between current and former special education teachers. Former special education teachers had a mean of 42.16 and current special educators had a mean of 38.15 for parental support factors. There is a statistically significant difference in parental support factors scores between current and former special education teachers. The effect size was .37 which demonstrates practical significance.

Table 5

*Parental Support Factors t-test*

		t	df	Sig.(2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Effect Size
Parental Support	Equal variances assumed	1.997	130	.048	4.01	0.37

\* $p \leq .05$

### Research Question Five

Research question five asked: Are school climate factors associated with special education teachers' retention and attrition in the field of special education?

Table 6 shows the t-test for school climate scores between current and former special education teachers. This factor had the highest mean of all the other factors indicating that both groups were most satisfied with the climate of their schools. Current and former special educators had means of 46.39 and 43.87 respectively. Therefore, it is concluded that there was no difference in the scores between current and former special education teachers for school climate factors.

Table 6

*School Climate Factors t- test*

		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference
School Climate	Equal variances assumed	1.389	130	.167	2.52

\*p ≤ .05

Table 7 identifies personal factors that influence special educators to leave special education. Former special educators listed personal factors that influenced their decisions to leave special education. Forty-seven percent of special educators left the field of special education because of "other reasons" such as job promotion and the desire for a different challenge.

"The job being too stressful" was the second reason that special education teachers listed as a reason for leaving the field of special education. Twenty-five percent of special educators selected this reason for their decision to depart from the field of special education. Other major reasons for leaving the field of special education included: undesirable salaries (12.5%), started a family (10%), and spousal transfers (5%).

Table 7

*Personal Factors Affecting Special Education Teachers' Attrition*

	N	Rank	%
Other	19	1	47.5
The job was too stressful	10	2	25.0
My salary was undesirable	5	3	12.5
I started a family	4	4	10.0
My spouse was transferred	2	5	5.0

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with 20 of the study participants to expand the researcher's understanding of the respondents' reasons for remaining or leaving the field of special education. The sample consisted of 10 *current* special educators reporting the reasons they decided to remain in special education and 10 *former* special educators reporting the reasons they decided to leave the field of special education. These extreme case samples were selected to emphasize the contrast that may exist between the two groups.

An analysis of the interviews conducted with current special education teachers revealed three emergent themes. In fact, all 10 of the current special education teachers that were interviewed stated that relationships with colleagues support from campus administration, and a vested interest in students were important reasons for their remaining in special education.

An analysis of the interviews conducted with former special education teachers revealed three emergent themes: the need for campus administrative support, the desire for more collaboration with colleagues, and assistance from central office. Interestingly enough both current and former special education teachers stressed the importance of campus administration and mentors and colleagues support.

**Summary of Findings**

Based on the analysis of the data, participants felt that campus administrative, mentors and colleagues, and parental support factors were important in their decision to

remain or leave the field of special education. Current and former special education participants disclosed that central office was not a significant factor in their decision to remain. In addition, results of this study were inconclusive in determining if school climate factors influenced special education teachers' retention and attrition.

Participants considered other variables to be important in their decisions to remain in or leave the field of special education. These variables included the amount of stress they had on the job, career advancement, and a vested interest in students.

As a result of the qualitative portion of the investigation, several themes emerged. Current special educators revealed in their interviews that campus administrative support, relationships with colleagues, and a vested interest in students were critical in their decision to remain in the field of special education. Former special educators stated in their interviews that campus administrative support, central office support, and collaboration with colleagues were central factors in their decision to leave the field of special education.

This study supported the literature that emphasizes campus administrative support and mentors and colleagues support both influence special educators decisions to remain or leave the field of special education. For example, according to Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, (2001), campus administrators and other teachers must provide support to special education teachers in order to decrease the attrition percentage. In addition, parental support, as determined in the literature, was also supported by this study. According to the literature, supportive parents increase special education teachers' capacity to accomplish their jobs successfully by encouraging and supervising homework and attendance, and providing general support for the teachers' rules and efforts, enabling teachers to be more respected and effective in the classroom (Lumsden, 1998; Wiggs, 1998).

The literature reveals that it is vital for special education teachers to receive more than basic support from central office administration in order to remain in the field of special education (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995). Results from this study did not support the premise that central office support is vital to special education teachers' retention and attrition.

Based on this study, it is still not clear-cut if special education teachers' decisions to remain or leave the field of special education were influenced by school climate. This is inconsistent with the literature that emphasizes that a climate of excellence must be established by the leadership staff by putting forth a vision of continuous improvement in the faculty performance (Tirozzi, 2001).

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, data were collected in this study using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The conceptual framework, borrowed from the literature on the retention of general education teachers, emphasizes the following factors may influence special education teachers' retention and attrition: campus administrative support, central office support, mentors and colleagues support, parental support and school climate factors. Quantitative and qualitative data revealed current and former special educators

participating in the study believed certain factors may influence their decisions to remain or leave the field of special education.

Data collected from the *Teachers' Retention and Attrition Factors Survey* and interviews revealed current and former special educators participating in the study believed campus administrative, mentors and colleagues, and parental support factors have a role in special education teachers' retention and attrition. The study was inconclusive about the impact of school climate factors on special education teachers' retention and attrition. An additional factor that emerged from this study as a reason for special education teachers' retention, that was not a part of the conceptual framework, is a vested interest in students.

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