ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this review of literature was to investigate the effects of administrative support on the retention of special education teachers and to establish specific strategies principals can use to increase retention. The literature reviewed included studies analyzing data collected by NCAS and utilizing surveys completed by beginning special education teachers and principals. Results and conclusions from the studies indicated administrative support significantly impacts the decisions of teachers to remain in the field or exit the profession. Recommendations for improving the retention rate of special education teachers include establishing a positive school climate, promoting collaboration between new and experienced teachers, and implementing a comprehensive mentoring and induction program.
Chapter I: Introduction

“Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher.”

-Japanese Proverb

Every student deserves a great teacher. To meet this goal, there must be an adequate supply of certified and well-prepared educators. Unfortunately some of the students in our schools with the highest needs are taught by unqualified and inexperienced teachers. In the United States there are an estimated 30,000 special education teaching positions filled by persons who do not possess the appropriate certifications, while still other positions remain vacant (Council of Exceptional Children, 2000). More emergency teaching certificates are issued in special education than any other certification area (Copenhaver, 2005). The lack of qualified special education personnel may be attributed to the high turnover rate of teachers in their first few years of service, although general education classrooms are affected as well. Approximately one-third of all teachers leave the profession within their first five years in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2003), and some estimates are even higher. The following figure illustrates the percentage of beginning teachers who have left the teaching profession after each of five years.

![Figure 1: Beginning Teacher Attrition is a Serious Problem](image-url)

The causes of special education teacher attrition are complex, but there are some common factors among those who leave the profession. Teachers with less experience, who are younger, and who are uncertified in their area are most likely to be at high risk for leaving the field (Billingsley, 2004b; Whitaker, 2000b). The reasons teachers exit special education also varies. Employment issues, working conditions, stress, student problems, burnout, increasing workloads, paperwork, role conflict, role ambiguity, feelings of isolation, personal issues, and lack of support are among the potential causes (Bore & Bore, 2009; Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007).

Some researchers have argued that insufficient numbers of college students are entering the special education field, creating an imbalance of supply and demand (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). An expected increase in student enrollments and prediction of increased teacher retirements added to this belief. To combat the disparity, recruitment strategies such as “Troops to Teachers” and alternative certification programs such as “Teach for America” have been implemented (Ingersoll, 2001). The problem, however, is not finding enough teachers to teach; the problem is keeping them at school (National Commission on Teaching America’s Future, 2007).

Researchers have suggested that school staffing problems are actually a result of the constant turnover of teachers entering and leaving the profession (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). While some employee turnover is good for any organization to eliminate low-performing employees and introduce fresh ideas, high rates of teacher turnover are concerning due to monetary cost, the quality of teaching, and are indicative of underlying problems within the school (Ingersoll, 2001).
Excessive teacher turnover is responsible for draining school resources and diminishing teaching quality (NCTAF, 2007). Researchers estimate the monetary cost of public school teacher turnover could be over $7.3 billion a year when factors such as recruiting, hiring, and training of replacement teachers are included (NCTAF, 2007). The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2007) study also found teacher attrition is highest in schools that serve high numbers of minority, poor, and low-performing students. High need schools are constantly hiring and replacing teachers who leave before they reach experienced levels contributing to the achievement gap between white and minority students. Therefore, providing support to beginning special education teachers will not only reduce teacher attrition, but may also improve the quality of services students receive (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004).

Principal leadership can play an important role in the retention of special education teachers. Developing and supporting beginning special educators is a critical leadership activity and requires an organized effort (Billingsley, et al., 2004). The absence of administrative support is often listed as a cause for leaving the profession, while its presence is considered an incentive for retention (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Principals can reduce teacher turnover by implementing rational and comprehensive human resource policies (NCTAF, 2007). Administrative support can be interpreted by special education personnel in various ways. Categories of administrative support may include informational support, instrumental support, emotional support, and appraisal support (Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994).

To retain and reduce the demand for special education teachers, principals must provide tangible interventions and strategies. Induction programs, mentoring, ongoing professional development, appropriate allocation of resources, and frequent interactions can help teachers develop into important members of the school community (Copenhaver, 2005).
Statement of the Problem

A persistent and severe shortage of special education teachers exists in the United States (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, teacher attrition has grown by 50% over the past fifteen years, while the national teacher turnover rate has risen to 16.8% (NCTAF, 2007). Statistics from the Teacher Attrition and Mobility: 2008-09 Teacher Follow-Up Survey indicate that of public school teachers with 1-3 years of experience, 7.2% moved to another school (transfer attrition) and 9.1% left the teaching field altogether (exit attrition). Of teachers leaving the profession, retirement accounted for approximately 28%. Explanations given for leaving other than retirement are varied, but a large percentage of reasons are factors open to influence by school personnel or policies. A flowchart in Appendix A exhibits the possible pathways special educators may follow when remaining or exiting from the special education teaching force (Billingsley, 1993).

To provide the best possible education, students with disabilities must be taught by experienced, highly qualified teachers. The acquisition of knowledge and skills by students is directly related to achievement, independence, and quality of life (CEC, 2000).

Teaching students with special needs is challenging with the best of conditions. Paperwork, lack of resources, and behavioral issues contribute to feelings of being overwhelmed and underprepared.

Many special educators leaving teaching positions point to lack of administrative support as a motive. To retain new recruits, principals must take a proactive approach to support teachers considered high-risk for leaving. This paper will investigate factors special education teachers consider problematic, the extent principals can affect staff turnover, and specific ideas
administrative personnel can use for encouraging the newest and most vulnerable teachers to promote retention.

**Research Question**

To what extent does administrative support affect special education teacher retention and how can administrators increase retention?

**Definition of Terms**

*Attrition.* “Teacher turnover either by changing positions or leaving the profession all together” (Otto & Arnold, 2005, p. 254).

*Transfer attrition.* Special educator “transfers to another special education teaching position or transfers to a general education teaching position” (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 50).

*Exit attrition.* Special educator exits the teaching profession to retire, pursue other job opportunities outside the school environment, pursue other job opportunities within the school environment (administration, counseling), return to school, for personal reasons, or is unemployed. (Billingsley, 2004b)

*Highly qualified teacher.* “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) defined the concept of a “highly qualified teacher” as one with (a) a bachelor’s degree, (b) full certification, and (c) demonstrated expertise in the subject matter of each core subject taught” (Boe, 2006, p. 139).

*Experienced teacher.* “The movement from novice to expert teacher is a process often thought to involve accumulating 3 to 5 years of classroom experiences, having opportunities for teacher reflection, receiving formative feedback, and being closely supervised or mentored by a veteran teacher” (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, p. 33).
Induction. “Induction is a highly organized and comprehensive form of staff development, involving many people and components, that typically continues as a sustained process for the first two to five years of a teacher’s career. Mentoring is often a component of the induction process” (Wong, Britton, & Ganser, 2005, p. 379).

Mentoring. “is the personal guidance provided, usually by seasoned veterans, to beginning teachers in schools” (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, p. 683).

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Factors Affecting Special Education Teachers

To explain exiting from the teaching profession, special educators cite many reasons why. Before principals can attend to the special education teacher turnover crisis, the factors unique to special education must be examined and understood.

By recognizing what beginning special education teachers experience, administrators can create environments in which early career special education teachers can be developed and supported thereby reducing attrition rates. Research has been conducted on the needs and experiences of beginning general education teachers for several decades, but a focus on the distinctive circumstances of beginning special education teachers has received attention only recently (Billingsley et al., 2004).

Griffin et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative analysis of factors affecting first-year special educators to focus on two research questions: (a) “What are 1st-year special educators’ accomplishments and problems?” and (b) “What school and classroom context factors are associated with 1st-year special educators’ most significant accomplishments and pressing problems?” (Griffin et al., 2009, p. 48).

A 31-item survey instrument was designed through consultation with a university-sponsored survey research center along with the utilization of results constructed from a federally funded research project. The findings from the federal research study inspired the broad themes to be included such as curriculum, collaboration, time, school climate, and behavior management. Four types of survey items were incorporated consisting of single, open-ended questions (demographic information such as What year were you born?), rank-ordered items, checklists, and Likert-type forced choice scale items to rate school facilities. Content validity of
items included on the survey was ascertained by receiving feedback from 10 local 1st-year special educators who piloted the instrument. The reliability was established by using a measure of internal consistency. Cronbach’s Alpha produced a mean alpha of .82, indicating high internal consistency.

Griffin et al studied 1st year special education teachers in the states of Florida and Wisconsin in the spring of 2000. All new teachers were identified from the State Department of Education databases in each state. The two states differed in several areas such as how certification could be obtained (traditional or alternative), inclusive practices in the state, and on measures of child well-being, possibly adding to the diversity of the sample of teachers surveyed (Griffin et al., 2009).

Originally 1,398 surveys in Florida and 608 surveys in Wisconsin were mailed to 1st-year special educators. After accounting for inaccurate addresses and ineligible surveys, 417 surveys were returned by teachers in Florida and 179 surveys were returned by Wisconsin teachers, for a total of 596 completed surveys. The result was a response rate of 29.71%. The authors of the study suggested the response rate compares to other early career special education teacher studies and are therefore “reasonably confident” the sampling is representative of beginning special educators (Griffin et al., 2009).

Data were analyzed by coding categories and creating subgroups of teachers according to responses given to items on the survey. Wilcoxon’s rank sum test was used to compare the groups of teachers on ordered data and Chi-square tests were used for group comparisons. Demographics of the participants were predictably common for surveys involving teachers. The sample was predominately Caucasian women with a mean age of 30.2 years. Females accounted for 87.25% of respondents, and most had earned Bachelor’s degrees (63.11%) with about a third
earning Graduate degrees (36.89%). Minorities comprised 13.37%, and Caucasians comprised 86.63% of the teachers included in the study.

The sampling of teachers was distributed almost equally between urban (34%), rural (30%), and suburban (32%) schools. Another 4% taught in what were labeled “college towns.” Of the 1st year special education teachers surveyed, most reported working in schools where over 50% of the students received free or reduced-price lunch and most taught in self-contained classrooms with mainstreaming arrangements. The majority of participants taught elementary age students.

All disability categories recognized federally were represented by students in the beginning teachers’ classrooms, but the majority of students were eligible for special education services with specific learning disabilities (80%). Another 73% of students were identified with behavior disorders and 46% of students received services for mental retardation. For this survey item, students may have qualified under several disability categories resulting in total percentages over 100.

To answer the first research question of the study (What are 1st-year special educators’ accomplishments and problems of practice?) a list of teachers’ accomplishments from most to least frequently chosen was presented. Accomplishments included student learning (61%), behavior management (54%), classroom environment (43%), curriculum (42%), and communication and collaboration (32%). Problems consisted of time (63%), behavior management (45%), curriculum (36%), specific student concerns (33%), communication and collaboration (24%), and school climate (23%).

Researchers addressed the second question (What school and classroom context factors are associated with 1st-year special educators’ most significant accomplishments and pressing
problems?) by drawing inferences between 1st-year special educators’ problems and school context factors (Griffin et al., 2009). Beginning teachers who chose communication and collaboration as a top accomplishment also indicated a greater number of interactions with general educators, and higher percentages of teachers who ranked communication and collaboration as an important accomplishment taught near or next to a general education classroom. In contrast, teachers who did not categorize communication and collaboration as a top accomplishment tended to teach in classrooms removed from general education such as in a separate wing or portable classroom. Also, teachers who identified communication and collaboration as a major problem rated relationships with general and special educators as less supportive.

Other findings include teachers who listed curriculum as a top problem gave lower ratings to teaching materials and that time as a top problem did not have a negative impact on teachers’ relationships with principles of the building. Most significantly related to this paper’s research question were the statistically significant differences regarding 1st-year teacher interactions with other staff and the climate of the school. Teachers who ranked school climate as a critical problem had less supportive relationships with their principals and with general and special education colleagues than teachers who did not indicate school climate as a top problem.

Many of the factors identified in this study affected 1st-year special education teachers, but may not be of concern to beginning general education teachers. Variables ranked by the special education teachers including curriculum, relationships with general educators, location of the classroom, and classroom materials can be unique to special education teaching situations. Other variables such as time, school climate, and relationship with the principal could apply to
all beginning teachers. See Appendix B for further topics of concern for both regular and special education teachers.

Researchers developed the study to help identify more precise relationships between the problems and accomplishments of beginning special education teachers and the school context factors that might enhance or limit their efforts (Griffin et al, 2009). Results of the study drew connections between problematic issues for novice teachers and work environments. The association between school climate and the difficulties beginning special education teachers experience highlights the importance of a supportive school environment. Factors such as collegial relationships and frequent interactions appear to influence novice teachers’ perceptions of difficulties and achievements experienced in the first year of teaching. Principals can increase the accomplishments of novice teachers and minimize problematic issues by utilizing the findings from the study to create positive work environments. The results could be interpreted to mean that by providing positive work environments, principals are able to influence the critical decision of whether or not beginning special education teachers choose to remain in the profession.

**Administrative Support of Special Education Teachers**

Over the past few decades, the principal’s role has expanded from disciplinarian and building manager to instructional leader responsible for implementing IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and NCLB (No Child Left Behind). DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) noted that most principals do not have the training or field experience necessary to effectively administer special education programs while ensuring legal compliance. Without an adequate knowledge base, principals might lack the skills necessary to provide support to teachers. Special educators frequently cite a lack of administrative support as a key reason why
they leave their jobs. The shortage of well-prepared, competent school leaders has the potential to worsen the current shortage of special education teachers. (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

An anonymous survey of 1,543 administrators conducted in Virginia revealed that 90% of principals identified special education law and implementation as problem areas (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). While the study sought to examine the conditions and concerns of principals to see what their experiences and perceptions were of the growing shortage in the principalship, it also drew attention to the lack of knowledge that principals possess regarding special education.

In 2003, elementary, middle, and secondary school principals completed a seven-page, 176 question survey either on paper or online. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The sample was divided almost equally between men (49%) and women (51%). As a side note, the authors observed a similar survey of principals in Virginia fifteen years earlier was comprised of 83% men and 17% women illustrating the gender diversity that has been achieved in the principal position. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for racial and ethnic diversity; only 16% of principals surveyed were African American (4% fewer than in 1988), and less than 1% self-identified as Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or other.

Due to the concerns expressed by principals in the areas of special education law and implementation, respondents (75%) subsequently identified special education law and implementation as the top need for professional development. Other areas of need included increasing student achievement on standardized tests, data-driven decision-making, and assessment using multiple criteria. The other areas principals recognized as areas of need for professional development were also highly relevant to the area of special education.
Other findings from the study revealed 84% of principals reported working more than fifty hours per week, with 12% working sixty-five or more hours per week. Additionally, 30% of respondents reported spending more time on special education meetings than five years ago. Lack of salary increases were also of concern. Despite these findings, 88% of principals responded they would still choose to become principals if given the opportunity to do it all again.

Principals’ lack of fundamental special education knowledge contributes to issues between school leaders and special educators. Gersten et al. (2001) discovered administrators are appreciated when they show an understanding of the role of the special education teacher, even when the administrators do not actually provide material resources. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) found the more knowledge of special education principals indicated on a survey; the more involved the principals were with teachers about the programs and services provided to students with disabilities.

Wakeman, et al. (2006) conducted a survey of 362 members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) throughout the United States to focus on principals’ fundamental knowledge of special education (fourteen questions) such as characteristics of disabilities and historical legislative acts, and current issues (twelve questions) in special education such as accountability, effective intervention, and access to the general curriculum. A 3-point scale was used where 1 = limited knowledge, 2 = basic knowledge, and 3 = comprehensive knowledge. Another section (seven questions) contained statements about special education beliefs where principals indicated their level of agreement using a scale of agree, disagree, and no opinion. Questions about demographics, training, and experiences were also included. The survey was three pages long and was not intended to take more than ten minutes to complete. The authors considered the return rate of 36% comparable to many other survey
studies in special education even though the rate was lower than what is recommended for survey design. Statistical analysis was completed to find correlations between principal beliefs and knowledge and principal practice.

The subjects of this survey may not have been representative of all principals in the state of Virginia. As members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the respondents to the survey may over represent principals who are more inclined to stay current on important issues related to education. The members of NASSP may also characterize principals who are strong leaders and more actively participate in all matters of the school, including those related to special education. The survey was also self-reported which could lead to more favorable responses from the participants.

The purpose of the study was to investigate “principal knowledge of special education and the variables that were associated with that knowledge” (Wakeman et al., 2006, p. 163). In addition to the association between principals’ knowledge of special education and their involvement with teachers about programs and services provided to students with disabilities, principals’ knowledge was also linked with the provision of resources for instruction, planning time, and professional development opportunities. This study points to a positive relationship between principals’ knowledge and their beliefs and values about special education. Inversely, the results could be interpreted to suggest principals who are unaware of special education knowledge and practices can do little to support teachers (novice or veteran) in this area.

As school leaders, principals shape the climate, culture and vision of schools (Pugach et al., 2009). Organizational culture can be defined as the basic beliefs, values, and assumptions shared by people in an organization (Owens & Valesky, 2010). Principals bear the primary responsibility for creating school culture by establishing the attitudes, norms, and expectations.
Consequently, the principal’s values and beliefs about special education can significantly affect the culture of the school with regard to issues such as inclusion, paraprofessionals, and the role of the special educator (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

The U.S. Department of Education funded a quantitative analysis of the working conditions, induction support, and career plans of early career special educators in 2000. The information gathered from the analysis implies the extent to which school administrator support can affect the retention of beginning special education teachers.

The subjects were selected by using a stratified simple random sampling from the rosters of 370 public schools to ensure teachers of various age and disability groups would be represented. All teachers had taught five or fewer years and 80% of the teachers were fully certified for their current assignment. Survey respondents were primarily Caucasian (86%). African American teachers comprised 12% of the beginning special educators, and the remaining 2% of teachers were of other minority groups. Females represented 86% of the sample with a mean caseload of 22.8 students (median=15.7) for each early career teacher (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004).

Researchers developed the survey utilizing individual items from previous school and staffing surveys so current responses could be compared with existing data and a pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability of the survey. Analyses were completed including descriptive statistics, chi-squares, t tests, and analyses of variance. Results presented were weighted to produce national estimates (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004).

Computer-assisted telephone interviews were used to collect data. Response rate of the sampled teachers was 69%, and sampling weights were adjusted to account for nonresponding teachers within each job assignment for a total of 1,153 participants. Respondents were asked to
assess school climate items such as administrator and colleague support, the availability of materials, and feeling included in the school by rating items on a scale from 1 to 4. The extent to which the special education teachers received early career supports was also assessed on a 1 to 4 scale, with 1 = not at all and 4 = great extent. Items included professional development, assistance from building administrators, and informal help from other colleagues.

An interesting finding related to the purpose of this paper was that “informal help from other colleagues” was rated at a moderate or great extent 89% of the time in the early career supports category. Formal mentoring received a rating of moderate or great extent 66% of the time, meaning that approximately one third of early career teachers did not find formal mentoring helpful. Meetings with other new teachers was rated 63% helpful to a moderate or great extent (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004).

When asked who provided suggestions for enhancing their teaching, 77% of the early career special educators responded “other special educators,” with the other responses divided between “department chairs,” district level consultants, and principals. Another important finding “indicated that beginning special education teachers who planned to remain in the profession until retirement had significantly higher school climate scores than did beginning teachers who were undecided” (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004, p. 341).

Further analysis of the school climate ratings revealed some items that were of particular concern for the beginning special education teachers included: limited access to necessary materials, paperwork interfering with teaching, feelings of not being included in their schools, and having principals who do not understand what they do. Other researchers have found that teachers who experience these types of problems together are more vulnerable to stress and
frustration with their jobs, which can be a forerunner to burnout and attrition (Gersten et al., 2001).

Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004) concluded that “beginning special educators are more likely to receive informal support from colleagues more often than other forms of support and are more likely to find this support helpful” (p. 344). The authors hypothesized that the beginning teachers found the informal supports to be more valuable because the informal supports allowed for emotional support and the circumstances of the informal supports permitted the help to be modified to the specific issues and needs of the teacher. If beginning special education teachers are indeed more likely to find informal supports from fellow special educators as more valuable, this could imply that administrative support does not affect the retention of special educators to a large extent.

Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004) suggested that principals do not greatly affect special educator retention directly. However, the implication overlooks the importance of school administrators’ influence on the culture and climate of a school. By creating a school culture that promotes collegiality, the principal is actually affecting the retention of beginning special education teachers. The principal also possesses the ability to affect the school climate that may persuade early career educators to stay in the profession. The principal is often responsible for decisions regarding access to materials, school schedules, recognition of staff, facilitating cooperation among staff, and shared decision-making.

**Retaining Special Education Staff**

Attrition of beginning special education teachers has been well documented (Billingsley, 1993; Boe, 2006; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004; NCES, 2005; NCTAF, 2007). The consequences for not finding a solution this problem are grave, especially for students with
disabilities who could most benefit from experienced, highly qualified teachers. Evidence suggests that teacher effectiveness increases sharply after the first few years of teaching (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). Darling-Hammond (2003) argued that the constant turnover of beginning teachers reduces productivity of education overall as there is no long-term payoff from investments made to early career special educators who leave the profession after a few years. As teachers continually come and go, there is also a loss for the staff as a whole.

As a one principal observed,

Having that many new teachers on the staff at any given time meant that there was less of a knowledge base…It meant there was less cohesion on the staff. It meant that every year we had to re-cover ground in professional development that had already been covered and try to catch people up to where the school was heading. (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 9)

As early as 1994, Littrell et al. documented the role of administrative support for beginning special education teachers, but defining administrative support has proven challenging. Littrell et al. proposed a theoretical framework to help clarify the many aspects of support:

*Emotional Support.*

Principals show teachers that they are esteemed, trusted professionals and worthy of concern by such practices as maintaining open communication, showing appreciation, taking an interest in teachers’ work, and considering teachers’ ideas. (p. 297)
Instrumental Support.

Principals directly help teachers with work-related tasks, such as providing necessary materials, space, and resources, ensuring adequate time for teaching and nonteaching duties, and helping with managerial-type concerns. (p. 298)

Informational Support.

Principals provide teachers with useful information that they can use to improve classroom practices. For example, principals provide informational support by authorizing teachers’ attendance at in-service workshops, offering practical information about effective teaching practices and providing suggestions to improve instruction and classroom management. (p. 298)

Appraisal Support.

As instructional leaders, principals are charged with providing ongoing personnel appraisal, such as frequent and constructive feedback about their work, information about what constitutes effective teaching, and clear guidelines regarding job responsibilities. (p. 298)

Even with excellent suggestions and good intentions, there is usually only one principal per school building. As established earlier, the roles of principals have changed and intensified with the passage of IDEA and NCLB. To provide beginning teachers the support necessary to be successful in the classroom and remain in the teaching profession, mentors can be a valuable asset to both the principal and the beginning teacher. See Appendix C for a figure that illustrates the positive effects a mentor combined with an induction program can yield on the retention of first-year teachers.
Mentoring and Induction

Mentoring is one element of an induction program that addresses two issues in education: the sudden transition from student to teacher that beginning teachers experience and the problem of attrition by new teachers. Mentors can fill a gap between what new special educators need and what busy principals are able to provide. By promoting a school culture that values collegiality and collaboration, carefully matching mentors and mentees, and providing the time and resources necessary for mentoring principals are providing administrative support to beginning teachers. Research has also shown successful mentoring can promote collaborative relationships to help reduce the isolation many beginning special education teachers experience (Pugach et al., 2009). “The hope with mentoring is that supports in schools can help not only improve the quality of teaching but also encourage new teachers to remain in the field” (White & Mason, 2006, p. 192).

Selecting a mentor for a new teacher cannot be a haphazard gamble. Considerable research recommends choosing another a teacher within the same building who also teaches special education, preferably working with students with same category of disabilities (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Whitaker, 2000a, White & Mason, 2006). Currently mentors often have dissimilar teaching assignments; Whitaker (2000a) reported that one-third to one-half of the mentors assigned to special education teachers are not special education teachers themselves. The effectiveness of the mentoring may be significantly reduced because many of the needs identified by beginning special education teachers are related to special education issues, such as working with paraprofessionals and collaborating with general education teachers (White & Mason, 2006).

White and Mason (2006) designed research to measure how new special education teachers are impacted by mentoring and put into practice the Mentoring Induction Principles and
Guidelines developed by White and Mason for the Council for Exceptional Children (2003). This study took place in seven districts across the United States including Salt Lake City, Utah, Akron, Ohio, and Little Rock, Arkansas over the course of two years. The implementation checklist for the Mentoring Induction Program can be found in Appendix D.

A survey was developed with input from various sources, including a focus group from the 2000 International CEC Convention, interviews with beginning teachers and mentors, and literature on mentoring. Cronbach’s Alpha produced a mean alpha of .89 to .97 indicating a high internal consistency. With a return rate of 60%, the sample included 147 beginning special education teachers. For cooperation in completing and returning the surveys, new teachers were offered a $10 coupon incentive to purchase books at a national book store. Mentors received compensation from their respective school districts.

In most districts, beginning special education teachers were paired 1:1 with a mentor. In one district, mentors were paired 1:3 with new teachers. All participants were instructed to follow the Mentoring Induction Principles and Guidelines. The authors noted some flexibility was built into the program to help districts address its individual circumstances, such as the frequency and type of professional development provided, the types of compensation offered to mentors, and the level of principal involvement. Most participants were female and approximately 50% were elementary teachers. Over 60% of mentors had either master’s or educational specialist’s degrees and had been teaching an average of 12.8 years.

For the survey, researchers asked beginning teachers if they a) needed assistance with a list possible stressors and b) requested help from their mentor with the possible sources of stress encountered during their first year of teaching. A Likert-type scale was then used to determine the quality of the assistance received from the mentor teachers. The teacher responsibilities most
often identified as problematic included special education paperwork (84%), IEPs (84%), referral, placement, and evaluation of students (75%), obtaining classroom materials (70%), personal issues (69%), and getting acclimated to the new school (66%). Overall, beginning special education teachers were moderately to very satisfied with the quality of assistance received when they did ask the mentor teachers for support.

Researchers analyzed the gathered data along with demographic factors such as taught in the same building, taught the same grade level, and taught students with the same disability category. Mentoring effectiveness was found to be influenced by whether or not the mentor and new teacher taught in the same building, taught students with similar disabilities, and taught at the same grade level. While the beginning teachers indicated that mentoring itself did not impact the decision to stay or leave the teaching profession, the new teachers did give the mentors much more credit related to their overall success. The authors of the study noted feelings of success in the classroom can affect whether or not a beginning special education teacher remains in the profession (White & Mason, 2006). Results from this study also supported previous findings that administrative support strongly factored into beginning special education teachers’ decisions whether or not to leave their current school placement through exit or transfer attrition (White & Mason, 2006).

In contrast to the White and Mason study (2006), Whitaker (2000a) found a correlation between the effectiveness of mentoring and the beginning teachers’ intent to remain in special education. Though Whitaker’s research in not as recent, he explored more deeply what beginning special education teachers value in a mentoring program in addition to the examination of the impact the program had on teachers’ plans to remain in the field.
Whitaker (2000a) sampled 156 beginning special educators in the state of South Carolina in 1999. Most were female, Caucasian, elementary teachers who taught in self-contained classrooms. The return rate was 84% for a survey developed through focus groups, expert reviews, and individual interviews. A pilot study along with Cronbach’s alphas (all > .75) confirmed the validity and reliability of the data collected. Multiple analyses of the data were conducted including descriptive statistics and Spearman Rho Correlation Coefficients. Many correlations were ascertained from this information regarding the types and effectiveness of the mentoring received.

Whitaker (2000a) learned that to be perceived as most effective, contact between the mentor and beginning teacher must occur at least weekly, as the frequency was very highly correlated with the perceived effectiveness of the supports. Beginning teachers rated unscheduled meetings as most effective support, with scheduled meetings rated as second most effective. Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004) sustained these findings through later research.

The area beginning teachers received the most assistance was emotional support, followed by information about the school and district, special education information, interactions with others, and resources and materials. Emotional support was also rated as most effective, followed by information about the school and district, interactions with others, resources and materials, and special education information.

Whitaker (2000a) expressed concern with reference to the topics beginning teachers received mentoring on and what the new teachers felt was most valuable. The study found simply mandating a state level mentoring program was not enough to guarantee a positive mentoring experience, and the topics discussed were most often pertaining to the personal needs of the beginning teacher and the mechanics of the job rather than the growth of the students.
While Whitaker (2000a) recommended the content of mentoring should focus more on aspects of the job that directly impact students, the author also suggests caution as the survey found that beginning teachers most valued informal, unscheduled contacts to provide emotional support and information about the school and special education. To apply these findings to the current research question, administrators should use care when implementing mentoring programs. While the suggested focus of topics that impact students is admirable, principals must remember what the beginning special education teachers found most valuable. If the main purpose of a mentoring program is to promote the retention of new teachers, then issues of importance to the new educators must be a strong component of the mentoring program. Principals must strike a careful balance between supporting beginning teachers and promoting student achievement.

Mentoring can be an important part of an overall induction program. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) broadly defined induction as “support, guidance, and orientation…for beginning teachers during the transition into their first teaching jobs” (p. 681). Induction can include many components, but common activities include orientation sessions, professional development sessions, workshops, and support group meetings.

Smith and Ingersoll (2004) analyzed data collected from the 1999 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to determine whether first-year teachers who participated in induction activities or who received additional resources (reduced teaching load, classroom aide) were more or less likely to remain in their current positions. The National Center for Education Statistics administers the SASS for a nationally representative sample of new teachers. Important findings from the study include:
Mentor in One’s Field.

Having a mentor in one’s field decreased the risk of leaving at the end of the first year by about 30%, while having a mentor outside one’s field was associated with reducing the risk of attrition by 18%.

Common Planning Time or Regularly Scheduled Collaboration.

Having common planning time or regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers on issues of instruction reduced the risk of leaving by about 43%.

Additional Resources.

Having a reduced teaching load was positively associated with leaving while being assigned an aide had a very small association with an increase of leaving.

(Further analysis of these results revealed that part-time, itinerant, or uncertified teachers are most likely to have reduced teaching loads suggesting the reasons for leaving may be unrelated to the reduced work load itself.)

Appendix B illustrates Smith and Ingersoll’s analysis of the predicted probability of teacher attrition based upon the level of induction received. Beginning teachers who received the most induction activities were the least likely to leave teaching or move from their current school. For the purpose of this study, it was interesting to note that a basic induction consisting of a mentor and supportive communication from an administrator did little to reduce beginning teacher attrition. Adding common planning time or regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers plus a seminar for beginning teachers reduced the likelihood of teacher attrition by 12%. All of the above induction activities along with additional resources reduced the likelihood of teacher turnover by 21%. Results from this study, especially the finding that the largest reductions in teacher attrition were associated with activities that integrated new teachers into a
collaborative network of their more experienced peers, should be taken into consideration when designing a new teacher induction program.

Specific induction activities along with mentoring have been shown to be a powerful combination to help retain new special education teachers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In 2003 the Council for Exceptional Children developed guidelines encompassing the recommendations from research. The manual outlines critical elements of a comprehensive induction and mentoring program. Appendix D contains the Mentoring Induction Project checklist. According to Wong (2002) beginning teachers need more than just someone to run to when they are in trouble. By devoting time before school begins each year to investing in the welcoming, training, and incorporation of new teachers, schools send the message to new teachers that they are valued employees and you want them to succeed.
Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

Schools and students are affected by the serious issue of the attrition of beginning special education teachers. Estimates reveal that nearly one in four new teachers will exit the classroom by their fifth year of teaching (CEC, 2000). Researchers have documented the costs of new special educator turnover, both monetarily to school districts and through lack of student achievement (CEC, 2000; NCTAF, 2007). Students with special needs, who are minorities, and who are low-income are disproportionately affected by the turnover trend as teachers working in schools with these demographics are most likely to leave after just a few years (CEC, 2000; NCTAF, 2007).

Many factors exclusive to special education influence new teacher attrition, including working with general educators, special education paperwork, and the referral and placement of students (Griffin et al., 2009). One theme connecting the studies throughout this review was rather than looking at individual teachers or demographic trends, the researchers used organizational analysis to determine the factors contributing to the high rates of beginning special education teacher turnover. Researchers used an organizational perspective and a holistic view to examine the teacher shortage in special education by exploring the working environments and conditions of teachers to determine the underlying causes of new teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001).

Another theme running through the research reviewed is collaboration as an effective way to retain beginning special educators. Authors mentioned collaboration in many contexts, whether formal or informal (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Whitaker, 2000a). Collaboration with mentors or other experienced teachers can reduce isolation and provide opportunities for new teachers to receive many types of support. Smith and Ingersoll (2004)
determined collaboration to be the most influential aspect of an induction program. Activities that connected the new teachers with experienced peers were associated with the largest reduction in teacher attrition (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Lack of administrative support is often cited by special educators who have left the profession. Studies have revealed many principals have not had the training to prepare them for the role of leading in the area of special education (Di Paola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Wakeman et al., 2006). The current review of research reveals principals can however wield significant influence over whether or not beginning special education teachers remain in the profession.

Studies reviewed or referenced indicate many factors important to the retention of new special educators. Most of the identified factors in the studies reviewed that contribute to new teachers remaining on the job can be directly affected by organizational aspects principals may be able to modify or transform. Administrative support does affect special education teacher retention to the extent principals take action to directly and indirectly support beginning special education teachers.

Principals can utilize factors isolated throughout the current review to create positive work environments for new special educators. The creation of a supportive school climate through assistance with curriculum and procurement of classroom materials, providing time and opportunities for collegial relationships, informal contacts, and common planning periods, and making new special education teachers feel included as important members of the staff can lead to greater teacher retention (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Griffin et al., 2009).

Another factor administrators can affect to help retain new teachers is to become knowledgeable about special education policy and issues. When principals are more involved
and understand the role of special education they will then possess the information and skills necessary to support new special education teachers (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Wakeman et al., 2006).

Providing induction and mentoring programs with effective components such as mentors who are also special education teachers are an additional way principals can affect new teacher retention (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Whitaker, 2000a). Ensuring there are opportunities for high frequency contact with mentors provides support for new teachers (Whitaker, 2000a; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). Based on the present findings, administrators can take specific actions to encourage the retention of new special educators on staff.
Chapter IV: Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

With the current teacher turnover crisis occurring, school leaders must take swift and direct action to retain beginning special education teachers. Decisions made by administrators have a direct impact on working conditions for teachers (Northeast Regional Resource Center, 2004). To meet the goal of providing every student with certified and well-prepared teachers, principals should address the issue of retaining special education teachers.

Appendix E is a self-assessment tool for administrators designed to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in categories intended to increase retention of new special education teachers. The survey incorporates research highlighted or referenced in the current review plus additional items based on experience. This tool has been created to provide direction for school leaders who wish to address the issue of the oft missing administrative support cited by departing special education teachers. The instrument integrates the many aspects of support proposed by Littrell et al. (1994): emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. Because administrators can and do affect the job satisfaction of beginning special educators, the self-assessment has been developed as a guide for principals to focus on the most effective support based on research for new teachers.

Areas for consideration are categorized in eight domains. After data from the self-assessment has been gathered and analyzed, principals can then develop specific initiatives, put into practice targeted strategies to improve retention, and provide strong, consistent support for beginning teachers.
Recommendations for Further Research

The current review of literature opens the door to many more questions with regard to the attrition of early career special educators. Policy makers, teacher educators, and administrators need access to relevant research to guide decisions applicable to retain beginning special education teachers in the profession.

The role of teacher preparation in beginning special education teacher attrition deserves further investigation. An initial study could begin by closely scrutinizing teacher preparation and teacher attrition in one state possessing multiple teacher preparation universities. A longitudinal cohort study would follow cohort groups comprised of all the graduates of the special education teacher preparation program from one university. The number of universities in the state would determine the number of cohort groups.

Information to be gathered about the cohort groups as they are followed would include the length of employment, whether or not the teachers remained in special education, and where the teachers leaving the profession went upon exit from teaching special education. Data would be collected from the graduates via online surveys. If tracking graduates is an issue, assistance may be provided by school districts and alumni associations from the universities.

Results from the analysis could possibly uncover universities whose graduates are more or less likely to remain in the special education profession. University teacher education programs could then be studied for differences and similarities in the preparation of special education teachers. Attributes from the programs could be further analyzed to determine the characteristics in each program more or less likely to promote the retention of beginning special education teachers. If associations are discovered between teacher attrition and the university
teacher education program attended at the state level, a national sample may reveal additional qualities distinguishing programs that graduate special education teachers.

More topics meriting future research could address are the characteristics of principals whose schools experience low special education teacher turnover and the attrition rates and reasons of special education teachers who work in self-contained classrooms vs. inclusion models.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The shortage of qualified special education teachers has been well documented and is attributed to high rates of special education teacher turnover (CEC, 2000; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004; NCTAF, 2007). Multiple factors play a part in job dissatisfaction, but exiting special education teachers often point to the lack of administrative support as the reason for leaving. Administrators who lack knowledge in the area of special education may not have the information and skills to provide effective support to beginning special education teachers. Research has demonstrated the important relationship between school leadership and the attrition of special education teachers (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Principals possess the power to significantly influence the welfare of beginning teachers in many ways and can be the decisive motive to leave or continue teaching (Pugach, et al., 2009). Principals must embrace the role of retaining special education teachers to limit the shortage of qualified special educators. By employing research based strategies to provide support such as comprehensive induction programs, mentoring, promoting a positive school environment, and collegiality, school administrators can greatly affect the retention of beginning special education teachers.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Figure 1. Schematic representation of special education teacher retention, transfer, and attrition (Billingsley, 1993).
Appendix B

FIGURE 11
School Conditions are the Greatest Factor in Dissatisfaction-Related Teacher Turnover

Percent of Teachers Giving Reason for Dissatisfaction-Related Turnover (1994-1995)

- Inadequate Time: 31.3%
- Peer Salary: 26.9%
- student Discipline Problems: 25.0%
- Peer Student Motivation: 9.2%
- Class Size Too Large: 7.5%
- Lack of Faculty Influence: 42.9%
- 14.3%
- Classroom Interactions: 38.4%
- 7.6%
- Peer Administrative Support: 59.1%
- 39.1%

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Turnover After the First Year of Teaching
by Various Induction Experiences

- No Induction: 20% Leavers, 21% Movers
- Basic induction*: 18% Leavers, 21% Movers
- Basic Induction + Collaboration**: 12% Leavers, 15% Movers
- Basic Induction + Collaboration + Teacher Network + Extra Resources***: 9% Leavers, 9% Movers

* Refers to a mentor from teacher's own or another field and supportive communication from an administrator

** Refers to a mentor from teacher's own field and supportive communication from administrator and common planning time or regularly scheduled collaboration time with other teachers in field and participation in a seminar for beginning teachers

*** Refers to all components included in "basic induction + collaboration" (**) and participation in an external network of teachers and having a reduced number of preparations (course load) and being assigned a teacher's aide.

### MIP Implementation Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentoring Program</th>
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<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear Mentoring Program objectives developed collaboratively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readily available information on roles, expectations, policies, provisions and desired outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequately planned and funded</td>
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<tr>
<td>All first year teachers participate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentoring coordinated with other general mentoring programs but addresses special education concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship between mentor and new teacher for support and guidance - not tied to formal evaluation</td>
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#### Roles and Responsibilities

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**Beginning teacher responsibilities are to:**
- attend all training sessions
- request assistance proactively
- schedule and attend sessions with mentor teacher
- remain open and responsive to feedback
- observe other teachers
- conduct self assessment and use reflective skills
- participate in evaluation of program

**Mentor teacher responsibilities are to:**
- provide support and guidance
- acclimate beginning teacher to school and community culture
- observe beginning teacher regularly
- provide post-observation feedback in timely manner
- model appropriate classroom and professional behaviors
- attend all training sessions
- maintain professional and confidential relationship
- participate in evaluation of program

**Building administrator responsibilities are to:**
- demonstrate support, understanding and encouragement
- provide release time for beginning teachers and mentors
- observe and facilitate mentoring relationship
- nominate only master teachers as mentors
- reduce responsibilities of beginning teachers
- reduce responsibilities of mentors
- participate in evaluation of program
### Roles and Responsibilities (continued)

Mentor program coordinator responsibilities are to:
- manage the mentoring program
- ensure building level administrators are informed and supportive
- develop district policy guidelines for mentoring
- guide development and adoption of resource materials and conduct inservice training for new teachers and mentors
- arrange for and often conduct regular meetings of mentors and new teachers
- guide the implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of the mentoring program
- collaborate with other administrators regarding the referral of individual teachers for other more intensive support services, as needed

### Mentor Selection

Mentor teachers:
- must be special education teachers preferably in:
  - same school
  - teaching same population
  - at same grade level
  - are volunteers
  - have 3-5 years special education teaching experience in current district
  - are nominated as master teachers

### Orientation and Training

Mentor teacher training provided prior to school year with additional sessions throughout year

Mentor teacher training topics include:
- adult education principles
- effective communication skills
- consultation strategies (feedback and support)
- classroom observation skills
- advising and coaching skills
- problem solving skills

Beginning teachers hired prior to school opening and mentors participate in inservice before school; those hired after are paired with mentors and provided an orientation to program as soon as possible.

### Specific Implementation Components

District level person given specific responsibilities to coordinate and oversee mentoring program

Mentors receive compensation based on choices

Each mentor works with only one teacher per year.

Feedback obtained from mentoring team used to make recommended changes.
### Domain: Self Development

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Not Yet 1</th>
<th>Seldom 2</th>
<th>Mostly 3</th>
<th>Always 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actively seeks to educate self about issues and current topics in special education through professional memberships, professional development, continuing education, subscriptions to applicable publications, etc.</td>
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<td>Regularly participates in IEP meetings</td>
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### Domain: Teacher Supports

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<tr>
<td>Regularly observes and provide feedback to teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special educators are fully included in all staff professional and social activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time is allocated to regularly express appreciation to teachers and acknowledge good work</td>
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<td>School philosophy promotes the shared responsibility of educating students with special needs between general and special education teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>High quality, relevant professional development is provided with teacher input</td>
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<td>Access to specialists is available as needed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support teachers in interactions with parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide emotional support as needed to teachers with open communication and active listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>All staff have clear, realistic, written job descriptions to prevent role confusion or ambiguity</td>
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## Domain: Workload

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<tr>
<td>Time is specifically designated for IEPs, parent meetings, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistance with curriculum development is available</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caseloads are determined not just by number of students, but also factor in the severity of students’ disabilities and needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whenever possible clerical staff complete required special education paperwork</td>
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## Domain: School Climate

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<tr>
<td>Positive attitude is conveyed regarding special education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher ideas are welcomed, solicited, and given serious consideration</td>
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<td>Special education classrooms are located in the same areas of the school as general education classrooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special education classrooms are equal in size and aesthetics to general education classrooms</td>
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## Domain: Mentoring and Induction

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<tr>
<td>Implementation of a comprehensive induction program based on CEC guidelines</td>
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### Domain: Certification

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<td>Fully licensed and certified teachers are employed</td>
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<td>Teaching assignments are aligned with certification and experience</td>
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### Domain: Supplies

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<td>Special education classrooms are allocated adequate budgets</td>
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<td>Clerical staff assist with preparation of grants or alternative sources of funding</td>
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<td>Special education classrooms are equipped with current technology appropriate to students’ needs</td>
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<td>Training is provided to use technology effectively</td>
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### Domain: Collaboration

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<tr>
<td>Special education teachers have opportunities to communicate and plan with other special education staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special education teachers have built in time to communicate and plan with general education teachers</td>
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<td>Appropriate space is provided for teachers to socialize informally during lunches, breaks, after school, etc.</td>
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<td>Professional Learning Communities have been established</td>
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