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Retention and Attrition of Local Special Education Directors

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Local special education directors oversee district-level special education programs. They play an essential role in assisting with program administration, ensuring the quality of special education services and working with teachers and parents in the education process.¹ A number of state special education directors have noted that job turnover in local special education director positions presents an ongoing challenge. Although research relating to the role of the local special education director remains extremely limited, one study suggests that local directors are often frustrated by the lack of adequate funding for special education as well as a perceived lack of administrative support (Marsh, 2005). Another study suggests that one potential strategy for reducing attrition is mentoring for new special education directors (Collin, 2008).

The purpose of this document is to:

- describe challenges, as perceived by state directors of special education, relating to the retention and attrition of local special education directors; and
- propose strategies for addressing this problem at both the state education agency (SEA) and local education agency (LEA) levels.

Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) completed this document as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

DATA COLLECTION

Between March and May of 2009, Project Forum conducted a survey of all state education agencies SEAs using Zarca Interactive, an online survey management program, and received a total of 38 responses. Respondents from two additional SEAs reported that they chose not to complete the survey because they did not feel qualified to answer the questions regarding causes of local special education director attrition. Data were analyzed using Zarca Interactive and are reported in the following section of this document.

¹This description of the roles and responsibilities of special education administrators comes from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). For more information, visit the Council's website at: <http://www.cec.sped.org>.

FINDINGS

Scope of Problem

All respondents provided information regarding the number of local special education director positions currently filled within their state or non-state jurisdiction, the number of positions currently vacant and the approximate number of local special education directors who leave their positions each year. Total numbers of positions currently filled were as follows:

- less than 50 (7 SEAs)
- 50-99 (11 SEAs)
- 100-299 (10 SEAs)
- more than 300 (3 SEAs)
- unknown or not applicable (7 SEAs)

Total numbers of positions currently vacant were as follows:

- none (17 SEAs)
- 1-5 (5 SEAs)
- 6-10 (2 SEAs)
- 11-32 (4 SEAs)
- unknown or not applicable (10 SEAs)

The number of local special education directors who leave their positions each year varies significantly from state to state. Responses were as follows:

- fewer than 5 (10 SEAs)
- 5-10 (8 SEAs)
- 11-20 (8 SEAs)
- 21-30 (4 SEAs)
- 30-65 (3 SEAs)
- unknown or not applicable (5 SEAs)

Twenty out of 38 respondents reported that attrition of local special education directors posed a significant challenge for their state; 11 reported that attrition did not pose a significant challenge for their state; and seven respondents were unsure.

Causes of Attrition

Respondents identified a variety of causes of local special education director attrition. Most commonly, respondents reported that attrition is a problem due to the fact that local special education directors are:

- reaching retirement age and/or accepting LEA buy-outs (29 SEAs);
- spending a higher proportion of time on compliance/litigation matters and/or data collection and reporting activities (24 SEAs);
- frequently required to assume additional roles such as McKinney-Vento (homeless education) director or Section 504 director (22 SEAs);
- not receiving adequate administrative support and/or school board support (21 SEAs);
- facing increasing budget constraints to meet district needs (20 SEAs); and/or
- confronting increased shortages of qualified personnel (19 SEAs).

Less commonly, respondents reported the following causes of local special education director attrition:

- lack of familiarity with the field of special education (since local directors are often assigned from other areas);
- limited understanding of legal requirements under state and federal law;
- school district annexations and forced consolidations;
- unfunded mandates;
- complexity and “overwhelming” nature of the job;
- isolated nature of the work; and/or
- lack of respect from other LEA-level administrators and boards of education.

Current LEA Strategies

Respondents reported that LEAs are implementing a number of strategies in order to address the problem of local special education director attrition:

Most commonly, respondents described the following:

- creating monetary incentives such as placing special education directors on administrator pay scales as opposed to teacher pay scales;
- offering mentors for new local special education directors; and
- supporting ongoing participation in professional organizations for local special education directors, such as the Council for Administrators of Special Education (CASE).

Less commonly, respondents described:

- reducing the number of responsibilities or “hats” worn by local special education directors;
- hiring assistant coordinators in larger districts;
- providing additional support staff to handle paperwork;
- reimbursing for professional development activities;
- allowing release time for networking; and/or
- providing recognition and increased authority.

A few respondents also described strategies currently in place for recruiting local special education directors, including:

- establishing an internal recruitment and training process (e.g., “grooming” staff for responsibilities through lower level central office positions); and/or
- contacting the SEA for assistance.

Several respondents expressed concerns that LEAs were not implementing any strategies to reduce attrition.

Current SEA Strategies

Respondents reported that SEAs are implementing a variety of strategies in order to address the problem of local special education direction attrition.

Most commonly, respondents described:

- providing training and technical assistance for new directors (e.g., new directors' academies, year-long staff development and support); and
- offering targeted professional development opportunities for both new and experienced directors (e.g., video conferences and/or webinars on special issues and required reports, eNews newsletters providing information and resources, and/or leadership institutes and other conferences designed specifically for local special education directors).

Next most commonly, respondents described:

- formal mentoring programs for new directors (e.g., training veteran directors to become mentors for less-experienced directors); and
- cultivating a peer group for local special education directors to network with one another (e.g., using listservs, special education directors' blogs, bi-monthly face-to-face meetings, and/or professional organizations).

Respondents also frequently described strategies related to communication, such as:

- maintaining ongoing contact with local directors (e.g., monthly meetings between the SEA and local directors);
- inviting input from local directors on key issues; and
- instituting an "open door" policy to enable direct communication between local directors and SEA staff.

Less commonly, respondents reported efforts to improve working conditions for local special education directors by:

- developing paperless systems for data reporting and budgeting;
- instituting state-mandated individualized education program (IEP) forms and notices to facilitate compliance;
- making available numerous grant opportunities to augment local special education budgets (e.g., response to intervention [RTI] pilots, positive behavior interventions and supports [PBIS] training, and alternatives to suspension);
- providing opportunities for local directors to work collaboratively with their general education colleagues by serving as members of work groups, advisory groups, and/or ad hoc projects; and
- working with LEAs to better understand the importance of the special education director.

Finally, a few respondents described efforts to *recruit* local special education directors, including

- offering an aspiring directors recruitment program;
- developing an on-line Supervisor of Special Education Program through one of the state's institutions of higher education (IHEs); and
- making regulations more flexible as to who can serve as a local special education director.

LEA-Level Recommendations

Respondents generated the following recommendations for how local education agencies can better address the problem of local special education teacher attrition.

Most commonly, respondents recommended the following strategies regarding training and workplace supports:

- Provide adequate levels of support for directors (e.g., manage the full-time equivalency [FTE] so that the job is not overwhelming and provide quality clerical support).
- Support acquisition of skills through ongoing professional development.
- Provide adequate funding for special education and give local special education directors greater access to and control over their budgets.
- Provide more frequent networking opportunities.
- Offer an LEA mentoring program for new directors.
- Acknowledge the importance of local special education directors' contributions through competitive salaries.

Next most commonly, respondents recommended the following strategies related to increasing opportunities for communication and collaboration between local special education directors and the rest of the local leadership team:

- Promote inclusive practices in the decision-making processes of the LEA (e.g., always include directors in local policy development and decision making).
- Ensure that the local special education director is part of the central office staff.
- Promote alignment of special education programs with other district-level programs (i.e., get rid of a "silo" approach).

Less commonly, respondents recommended a retooling of the position itself. For example:

- Treat the position as a stand-alone position (i.e., limit assignments to special education responsibilities only).
- Consider hiring more than one director per LEA in order to share duties and provide peer support.

A few respondents also made the following suggestions as to how LEAs could *indirectly* reduce attrition rates:

- Cultivate improved understanding of the role of local special education directors by superintendents and other LEA-level administrators (e.g., include them in cabinet meetings).
- Provide training for superintendents and boards of education on the legal requirements and benefits of special education.
- Support parent engagement and alternative dispute resolution to reduce due process and litigation.

SEA-Level Recommendations

Respondents generated the following recommendations as to what SEAs can do to address local special education director attrition.

Most commonly, respondents recommended strategies relating to training and supports. For example:

- Provide training on critical leadership areas in special education;
- Offer New Directors' Academies.
- Work with intermediate agencies to develop consortia for local special education directors.
- Provide technical assistance and problem solving when requested;
- Initiate a state-level mentoring program.
- Provide adequate fiscal resources.
- Provide support to LEA directors in matters relating to compliance and monitoring requirements.
- Simplify reporting procedures to align with other SEA-required activities and reports (e.g., provide templates for reports).
- Assist in identification of trained/licensed related services personnel.

Respondents also made recommendations relating to increased opportunities for communication and collaboration. For example:

- Provide an ongoing and effective communication network between the SEA and local directors.
- Assign an SEA-level contact person for each region of the state to meet with local directors and help them navigate policies and procedures.
- Develop a listserv for local directors providing frequent information updates and staff development resources.
- Provide an online Q&A database that is continually updated to include inquiries to which the SEA has responded.
- Improve timeliness of communication and clarity of messages sent by the SEA.
- Offer more opportunities for local director input regarding planning of projects and identification of funding priorities.
- Include local directors on stakeholder committees.

Less commonly, respondents recommended strategies for improving morale and recognizing the contributions of local special education directors:

- Acknowledge what difficult jobs they have, and tell them how much their work is appreciated.
- Ask local directors how the SEA can support them.
- Highlight accomplishments of LEAs through statewide announcements and recognition programs.

A few respondents also made the following suggestions as to how SEAs could *indirectly* reduce attrition rates:

- Educate state superintendents to understand the needs of their local special education directors.
- Provide direction to LEAs, including the local superintendent, on the importance of well-trained and compensated directors.

Several respondents recommended strategies to improve *recruitment* efforts:

- Provide tuition assistance for promising candidates to take the required coursework for special education director certification.
- Develop a more accurate and reliable data system that can meaningfully track attrition of staff and reasons they left their positions.
- Remain flexible with LEAs regarding their retention/attrition of special education directors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The majority of respondents agreed that attrition of local special education directors represents a significant challenge for SEAs. Respondents described LEA- and SEA-level strategies for improving retention of local directors. Most commonly mentioned were the need for increased funding and/or financial incentives, mentoring programs, professional development opportunities and administrative support for reduced work load. Because the position of special education director is often solitary, the importance of opportunities for collaboration with general education colleagues and SEA staff, as well as new directors' academies was also noted. Finally, respondents agreed on the need for stronger leadership from the SEAs via improvements in communication, policy guidance, technical assistance and availability of resources.

REFERENCES

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