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Snapshot of Rural Special Education: Strategies to Attract and Retain Special Education Teachers

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Snapshot of Rural Special Education: Strategies to Attract and Retain Special Education Teachers

Abstract

This study's purpose was to obtain a current picture of special education in rural districts to understand what can be done to attract special education teachers and what can be done to keep them in rural regions. A survey adapted from Berry (2012) was administered via Qualtrics to special education teachers in rural Midwest US. Sixty percent of the special education teachers responded to the survey. The results revealed factors that enticed and retained teachers to rural settings included the provision of support, financial incentives, job-related factors, and rural initiatives. Although some findings revealed the factors that attracted and retained special educators were somewhat akin to factors in previous studies, slight variations were found such as broadened viewpoints of how financial benefits and support can be used to boost recruitment and retention. The results also showed that more work may be needed to address job-related factors and rural initiatives. Implications for the field are discussed.

Keywords

rural special education teachers, retention, attraction

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Snapshot of the Factors that Attract and Retain Rural Special Education Teachers

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Rural special education teacher shortage has been a chronic problem for decades (Berry, 2012; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; DeSutter & LeMire, 2016; Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020). Researchers have cited many reasons for these challenges including geographic and social isolation, limited availability of training and resources, lower pay, fewer benefits, and lack of collegial and administrative support (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; Mason-Williams et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018). These issues are of great concern as overall rural districts represent more than one-quarter (i.e., 28.5%) of the nation's school districts, which may range from a low of 8.6% in Rhode Island to a high of 74.4% in Montana (Showalter et al., 2019). Rural districts are identified based on proximity to larger urban centers. In this paper, rural refers to rural remote locales whose school districts are more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Annual special education teacher attrition rates in rural districts may fluctuate from 30% to 50% within a year, with evidence of 40% to 100% turnover during five years (Espel et al., 2019; Mason-Williams et al., 2019). The literature revealed even when school districts were able to hire special education teachers, many failed to retain them (Berry et al., 2012; Jameson et al., 2019). In light of the continuous cycle of finding and keeping teachers, there has been a plea to examine ways to attract and retain special education teachers in rural schools (Mason-Williams et al., 2019).

Research revealed several factors have contributed to rural special education teacher shortages. Special educators have left due to a change in job and/or location such as moving to other schools and/or transferring from special education to general education (Espel et al., 2019). Other factors cited as reasons for leaving the field of special education included unmanageable caseloads and excessive paperwork (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Special educators expressed challenges with teaching across the continuum of educational service settings and grade levels and reporting to more than one supervisor (Ault et al., 2020; Berry, 2012). They have reported feeling overworked due to the requirement to undertake several roles including diagnostician, interventionist, collaborator, manager, and leader (Johnson et al., 2018; Lubin, 2020). In some cases, they noted feeling isolated due to being the only special education teacher in their building and being responsible for students with a variety of disabilities, ranging from high-incidence to low-incidence disabilities (Berry, 2021; Berry & Gravelle, 2018).

Some special educators did not return to the profession after their first year due to lack of collegial and administrative support (Berry, 2021; Berry, 2012; Garwood et al., 2018; Rude & Miller, 2018). Mason-Williams et al. (2019) emphasized rural special education teachers' decision to stay in the field is heavily dependent on support from school personnel, district staff, and administration. Without a support system, these teachers experience job dissatisfaction, which leads to burnout and, thus, attrition (Ault et al., 2020; Berry et al., 2012; Rude & Miller, 2018). Studies have shown lack of support not only leads to burnout, but manifests in multiple forms including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of a sense of personal accomplishment (Berry et al., 2012; Garwood et al., 2018).

Rural districts have implemented several strategies to entice special education teachers to the profession. One of these strategies included increased pay, as researchers have highlighted financial incentives may be very influential in the hiring and retaining of special education teachers (DeSutter & LeMire, 2016; Putman & Gerber, 2022; Rude & Miller, 2018). However, other researchers have argued that solely increased salaries may not solve the chronic problem of

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rural special education teacher shortage. Studies revealed even when school districts were able to attract teachers with increased salaries, they were not very effective in retaining special educators (Showalter et al., 2019). Sindelar et al. (2018) expounded although higher pay may initially entice teachers, the lasting power of the incentive tends to wane over time. This may be because special educators are incentivized by more than monetary gains as they seek additional factors like a sense of community, administrative/collegial support, flexible work times, and slower pace of life (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Other factors highlighted in the literature have demonstrated success in attracting special education teachers included implementing initiatives that tap into local talent such as establishing *Grow Your Own Programs*, hosting local job fairs, and using rural special educators for recruitment (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018). *Grow Your Own* initiatives, where rural schools partner with colleges, have proven effective in recruiting local talent (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020). Another strategy that has been used to help draw on local expertise involved the intentional recruitment of rural special education teachers such as (i) recruiting pre-service teachers during student teaching because novice teachers tend to begin their careers where they student teach and (ii) recruiting candidates who studied in metropolitan areas as research has shown they tend to return to teach in their home communities (Krieg et al., 2016; Mason-Williams et al., 2019). Other techniques that have been effective in attracting teachers to rural districts include creating/reinforcing community connections and promoting a safe work-and-life environment (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Rude & Miller, 2018; Sindelar et al., 2018).

This study aimed to add to the current literature on the factors that help attract and retain special education teachers in rural settings. While there has been some research conducted on topics germane to rural special education, recent decades have seen a relatively modest commitment to identifying and understanding why special educators stay and what can be done to attract them. The problems being addressed in this study included the shortage of qualified special education teachers in rural districts and the difficulty in enticing and retaining them. As the number of students identified as needing special education continues to increase, the need for rural special educators increases (Rude & Miller, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine factors that attract and retain rural special educators. The research questions investigated include:

1. What factors help attract special educators in rural districts?
2. What factors help retain special educators in rural settings?

Methodology

A survey was used to gain an understanding of factors that impact the attraction and retention of special educators in rural settings. This research is based on special education teachers responses from three special education cooperatives in one section of rural remote Midwest US. The use of the survey allowed for gathering large amounts of data from isolated geographical locations in a relatively short period of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

Using convenience sampling, participants were chosen from three special education cooperatives in rural remote locales in the Midwest US. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022) rural remote locales include territories that are more than 25 miles from an urbanized area

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and are also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. Of the 155 surveys received, 62 were incomplete, i.e. one or more questions were not answered. After eliminating incomplete responses ($n = 62$), the total number of special education teachers who completed the entire survey was 93, giving a 60% response rate.

In terms of gender, 88 % ($n = 82$) of participants were female, 12% ($n = 11$) were male. Regarding race/ethnicity, 94% ($n = 87$) of special educators identified as White, while 1% identified as Black ($n = 2$), Hispanic ($n = 2$), and Native American/Alaskan ($n = 2$), respectively. The demographic makeup is representative of the geographic area where the study took place. The age range of respondents varied from 21 years to over 60 years, with 27% ($n = 25$) being under 40 years and 73% ($n = 68$) being over 40 years.

The years of special education experience and credentials varied among participants. Sixty percent ($n = 56$) of the special educators had more than five years of experience, with approximately 40% ($n = 37$) having five or fewer years of experience. The participants had qualifications ranging from incomplete bachelor's degree (2%) to education specialist degree. The participants with incomplete bachelor's degrees constituted individuals enrolled in alternative pathway programs who teach special education while enrolled in a special education teacher preparation program. Forty percent ($n = 37$) had a bachelor's degree while fifty-eight percent ($n = 54$) of special educators had a graduate degree or above.

Data Collection

A survey created by Berry (2012) was adapted and used to collect data for this research study. Based on feedback from rural special education professionals including four special education administrators, five rural special education teachers, and two special education higher education faculty, eight questions from the original survey were omitted because they did not relate to the purpose of the study such as questions on identifying persons responsible for students with disabilities and payment for professional development. The instrument used in this study consisted of 32 questions, including 5 demographic data questions, 23 multiple-option, 2 Likert-Scale, and 2 open-ended items. Multiple-option questions addressed colleague, administrator, and community support and participant primary responsibilities. The open-ended questions included:

- What can be done to retain special education teachers in small towns or rural schools (districts)?
- What can be done to attract special education teachers to small towns or rural schools (districts)?

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at the principal researcher's institution, an email was sent to three rural special education cooperative administrators in rural Midwest US with a request to forward an "invitation to participate" email to special education teachers in their cooperatives. A link to the Qualtrics survey was included in the invitation email.

Data Analysis

Similar to other research in the field, the data were analyzed descriptively, including frequency and percentages to address the research questions under investigation (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Berry et al., 2012). To examine the relationship between teacher retention and satisfaction

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measures a series of bivariate correlations and independent samples t-tests were conducted using SPSS statistical software.

Open-ended responses were analyzed inductively. First, responses were compiled by questions containing each teacher's response. Then, sub-themes were identified using data-driven thematic analysis, which were collated into potential themes. All data were double-coded by an independent researcher and the interrater agreement level was 100%. A total of four themes with sub-themes was identified (see Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency of Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency for Retention	Frequency for Attraction
Provision of Support		65	29
	Community	18	7
	Administrative	35	16
	General educator	12	6
Financial Incentive		49	90
	Increase salary	43	57
	Loan forgiveness & support for college expenses	3	7
	Reduce health insurance cost	3	16
	Sign-on bonus	0	3
	Housing	0	7
Job-Related Factor		40	15
	Reduce paperwork & caseload	17	7
	Provide resources	4	1
	Work-life balance	3	0
	Professional development	16	7
Rural Initiatives		2	9
	Career fairs hosted by rural teachers	0	7

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Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency for Retention	Frequency for Attraction
	Grow Your Own	2	2

Although the number of themes does not necessarily address the value of the response, it provides a basic overview of participants' attention to themes/sub-themes.

In addition to identifying themes from the open-ended questions, quantitative methods such as correlations and *t*-tests, were used to explore the relationship between retention plans and teachers' perceptions of satisfaction and support. First, a Satisfaction score was calculated from 10 items, which assessed teachers' level of agreement with questions such as, "If you had a chance to do it all over again, I would become a special education teacher" and "The size of my caseload is manageable." These questions were answered using the 4-point Likert Scales of strongly disagree to strongly agree, and very dissatisfied to very satisfied. The reliability estimate was calculated for this scale using Cronbach's alpha and was acceptable ($\alpha = .78$). Second, the Support score was calculated from responses to 20 questions about support from administrators, peers, and the community. These items include questions such as "Please indicate the amount of support received from a mentor teacher" and "The responsibility of providing services for the students with disabilities on my caseload falls entirely on my shoulders." These questions were answered using the 4-point Likert Scales of not helpful to very helpful, and strongly disagree to strongly agree. The reliability estimate was calculated for this scale using Cronbach's alpha and was also in the acceptable range ($\alpha = .65$).

Results

Results are presented in response to research questions of this study. Several themes were identified for research question one and research question two (see Table 1). These included the provision of support, financial incentives, job-related factors, and rural initiatives.

Retention of Rural Special Education Teachers

When asked what can be done to retain rural special education teachers, participants highlighted four major factors: provision of support, financial incentives, job-related factors, and rural initiatives (see Table 2). The majority (70%) of participants ($n = 65$) stated that provision of support was a key factor in retaining teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Data on Strategies to Retain and Attract Teachers

Strategies	Retention		Attraction	
	n	%	n	%
Provision of Support	65	70	29	31
Community	18	19	7	7

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Table 2*Descriptive Data on Strategies to Retain and Attract Teachers*

Strategies	Retention		Attraction	
	n	%	n	%
Administrative	35	38	16	17
General educator	12	13	6	6
Financial Incentive	49	53	90	96
Increase salary	43	46	57	61
Loan forgiveness & support for college expenses	3	3	7	8
Reduce health insurance cost	3	4	16	17
Sign-on bonus	0	0	3	3
Housing	0	0	7	7
Job-Related Factor	41	44	15	15
Reduce paperwork & caseload	17	20	7	7
Professional development	16	17	7	7
Provide resources	4	4	1	1
Work-life balance	3	3	0	0
Rural Initiatives	2	2	9	9
Career fairs hosted by rural teachers	0	0	7	7
Grow Your Own	2	2	2	2

Respondents explained support as assistance from administration and general education teachers. Teachers emphasized the importance of administrators showing “respect for educators,” and effectively using interpersonal skills to “make educators feel heard.” One respondent stated, “...it would be helpful if building principals would be more involved in the special education program...” In addition, 13% of the special education teachers explained they needed support from general educators, specifically with implementing inclusive practices. Participants expanded the definition of support to include community networking as 19% ($n = 18$) mentioned establishing a connection to the wider community as a way to retain teachers. One special educator explained it can be “isolating working in small districts” and so “forming networks of other special education teachers” can be helpful. Support would entail “creating a supportive environment for new teachers, <where they> don’t ...feel like outsiders.” One recommendation was

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administrators “work with community leaders to come up with events to host or sponsor weekend entertainment.”

The correlational analysis revealed mixed findings related to Support. First, there was a significant negative relationship between Support and years of experience ($r = -.25, p = .01$). This suggests the teachers with more years of experience felt less support from the administration, peers, and the community. However, a significant positive correlation was found between Support and teacher’s plans to remain in their current positions for the next school year ($r = .28, p = .005$), which indicated if they felt supported, they were more likely to have plans to stay in their teaching position. Similarly, the t -test results showed there was a significant difference $t(94) = -2.68, p = .004$ between Support for those who planned to stay ($M = 52.16, SD = 6.91$) and those who planned to leave ($M = 48.49, SD = 6.31$), suggesting teachers who plan to leave felt less supported in their roles. Of those who indicated they were planning to leave the profession in the next year, 27 % listed lack of support as the reason (see Table 3).

Table 3

Frequency of Themes Reported by Those Planning to Leave

Themes	$n=22$	%
Provision of Support	6	27.7
Financial Incentive	1	.05
Job-Related Factor (load, balance)	8	36.3
Rural Initiatives	5	22.73
Personal (getting married)	1	.05
Other (retirement, promotion)	2	.09

keep special education teachers in rural settings. Financial incentives included factors such as increased salary, college loan forgiveness, and lower insurance cost (see Table 2). Increased salary was noted by 46% ($n = 43$) of respondents, who summarized this as, “Money!!!,” “Salary!!!,” and “\$\$\$.” A smaller percentage of respondents also explained teachers may be retained in rural schools by offering loan forgiveness for college (3%) and reducing health insurance costs (4%). Regarding health insurance, one teacher elaborated that providing family health insurance plans (as opposed to single plans) would help retain more teachers.

A third theme 44% ($n = 41$) of participants identified as a means to keep special education teachers in rural districts was job-related factors, which included reduction of paperwork, lower size caseload, allocation of resources, provision of professional development, and greater work-life balance (see Table 2). In fact, 20% ($n = 17$) of participants believed reduction in paperwork and caseload would help retain teachers. This included assistance with the management of large caseloads and supplying resources to carry out duties. Participants explained assistance with large caseloads, availability of current technological tools, and training in the use of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) may encourage teachers to stay. In regard to training, 17% ($n = 16$) noted that the provision of professional development should focus on the needs of rural settings including “trainings that are specific to what we do and deal with on a daily basis.” Some participants also requested specific professional development to address behavior management in rural settings (9%) and strategies to work with students with various disabilities (5%). Four percent ($n = 4$) of respondents explained availability of additional resources such as

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support staff, access to specialists, and technological training would help retain teachers. Three percent ($n = 3$) of participants explained having a job that allows for balanced work-home life may help keep rural special education teachers. This includes providing teaching opportunities that allow sufficient time during the school day for planning, collaborating, and meeting with colleagues.

Job-related factors are typically linked to job satisfaction. The correlational analysis revealed there was a significant relationship between Satisfaction and remaining in the profession $r = .23$, $p = .03$. Additionally, the t -test results showed there was a significant difference $t(94) = 2.37$, $p = .01$ for Satisfaction between those who plan to stay ($M = 33.75$, $SD = 3.81$) and those who plan to leave ($M = 31.83$, $SD = 4.07$), suggesting teachers who planned to leave report lower levels of satisfaction. As shown in Table 3, among the teachers who indicated they were leaving the profession in the next school year, 36% listed job-related factors as the reason they were leaving.

Fourthly, 2% ($n = 2$) identified one rural initiative, *Grow Your Own Programs*, as a way to retain teachers (see Table 2). One person explained that one will “more likely stay if they grew up in a small town and know what it's like.” Another elaborated, “it is hard to find teachers to come out here” and so recommended providing incentives to teachers who stay in rural districts. Both participants stated a cultural paradigm shift may be needed to help retain special education teachers, especially those from diverse backgrounds, in rural communities. Of those who indicated they were planning to leave the profession in the next year, 22% reported the limited rural incentives as the reason (see Table 3).

Factors that Attract Special Education Teachers to Rural Districts

Similar themes were found in response to research question two as those identified in response to research question one. The responses were summarized under four major themes: financial incentives, provision of support, job-related factors, and rural initiatives (see Table 2).

The majority (96%) of respondents ($n = 90$) stated financial incentives would be helpful in attracting teachers to rural districts (see Table 2). They described financial benefits as increased salaries (61%), better health insurance plans (17%), college loan forgiveness options and support for college tuition (8%), provision of housing (7%), and sign-on bonuses (3%). See Table 2. Participants explained competitive pay and benefits would entice special education teachers to rural schools, especially for those seeking work-life balance. One respondent elaborated that providing “more competitive pay/housing” would be helpful in increasing the likelihood of living in rural regions. Respondents explained housing benefits as offering relocation fees and reduced rent (for length of employment). Other factors identified were provisions of affordable and accessible childcare and assistance with college tuition, especially while candidates get certified/licensed.

One-third (31%) of respondents ($n = 29$) noted the provision of support would help attract teachers to rural districts (see Table 2). Participants defined support as offering collegial support from administration and general education teachers. Among the various types of support, administrative support was recommended most by 17% ($n = 16$) of the respondents who explained that supportive, respectful leaders help create a sense of belonging. A specific proposal included leaders “providing direct support ... with strategies for time management and

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responsibilities.” Few mentioned that general education teacher support (6%, $n = 6$) would be additional incentives to attract teachers. Seven percent ($n = 7$) of respondents noted support went beyond the school to include support from the community. One person suggested recruiters emphasize the benefits of rural communities, such as “community togetherness and low crime rate.” Another recommended providing “information about what the town has to offer (places to eat, shop, low rent), and help <potential candidates> get out there ... if they are single.” However, one cautioned recruiters to be intentional as “rural life isn't for everyone” and so proposed “having candidates visit the area prior to or during interviews.”

Regarding job-related factors, 15% ($n = 15$) stated reduction in paperwork, lower numbers on caseload, provision of resources, and provision of professional development activities would help attract special education teachers to rural districts (see Table 2). For the 7% ($n = 7$) who mentioned reduction in paperwork and caseload, they noted providing strategies for time management and avenues to build relationships with parents and colleagues. Professional development was proposed by 7% ($n = 7$) of participants with recommendations including continuous Individualized Education Program (IEP) training and updated technological teaching tools. A small percentage (1%) noted that the provision of resources would serve to attract teachers.

In reference to the rural initiatives theme, participants recommended some rural-specific recruitment strategies to attract special education teachers to rural districts. Nine percent ($n = 9$) of respondents suggested implementing *Grow Your Own Programs* and utilizing rural special educators to host career fairs (see Table 2). Two percent ($n = 2$) of participants felt developing *Grow Your Own Programs* to tap into local talent would both attract and retain teachers, while 7% ($n = 7$) believed career fairs hosted by rural teachers would entice special educators to rural areas. One respondent noted recruiters not only have to be local but also have to possess a dynamic personality. Another participant proposed “having rural teachers from out-of-state go back to their state and sell the idea <of rural schools> as people want to hear from people who have been in that situation.”

Discussion

To some extent, the results were aligned with previous research; however, in this study participants provided a broader interpretation of some retention and recruitment factors. Due to similarity in the factors identified to help attract and retain teachers, the discussion of the findings of research questions one (retention) and two (attraction) will be reviewed based on the themes highlighted by participants. The retention and attraction themes included awarding financial incentives, providing support, offering “satisfactory” job-related factors, and implementing rural initiatives.

A large percentage of participants in this study believed financial incentives would be key factors in retaining (53%) and attracting (96%) teachers to rural settings with most believing increased salary and bonuses will do the job. To some extent, the perceptions of participants in this study on the power of financial incentives align with previous research as the majority believed that increasing salaries would minimize the problem. Putman and Gerber (2022) noted salary increase has been cited as the most commonly used incentive to attract/retain special education teachers. However, Sindelar et al. (2018) explained that in rural settings where special education teachers were given increased salaries and annual bonuses, almost half left the field within five

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years. The majority of participants in this study were teachers with more than five years of experience, which may explain why some broadened the definition of financial incentive to include not only salaries but also better health insurance plans, college loan forgiveness options, support for college tuition, provision of housing, and sign-on bonuses. Other researchers have identified some of these financial incentives individually as a means of reducing teacher turnover (DeSutter & LeMire, 2016; Espel et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018). However, in this study participants noted the combination of financial incentives may be more powerful in attracting and retaining teachers than individual factors. Therefore, further research may investigate the extent to which the collective financial incentive helps recruit and retain special education teachers in rural districts.

Almost three-quarters of respondents in this study believed the provision of support (from administrators and general educators) can help retain rural special educators while one-third believed it will assist in attracting teachers to rural settings. These findings were similar to other research where most participants believed administrative support and collegial support were pivotal (Ault et al., 2020; Berry et al., 2012; Mason-Williams et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018). However, participants of this study elevated the definition of administrative support to include school leaders assisting with job-related activities and effectively using emotional intelligence. Respondents believed supportive administrators can create a conducive working environment through respect, empathy, and appreciation.

In addition, more than one-tenth of participants in this study agreed the retention and recruitment efforts would benefit from support not only from administrators but from colleagues as well. Like other research, teachers in this study found beneficial collegial support stems from professional learning communities and general educator collaboration (Berry, 2021; Rude & Miller, 2018). Studies have shown when the support structure entails limited support from administrators and colleagues, special education teachers tend to experience emotional exhaustion, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, which has a negative effect on retention and recruitment (Ault et al., 2020; Berry et al., 2012; Garwood et al., 2018; Mason-Williams et al., 2019). The findings of this study highlight the importance of support and job satisfaction as teachers who felt supported and satisfied tend to remain in the profession longer. Therefore, in order to help keep and recruit teachers, administrators should (i) utilize emotional intelligence when working with teachers, (ii) encourage collaboration among colleagues, and (iii) promote a conducive working environment to foster job satisfaction.

In regard to the third theme, overall, 44% of the participants believed satisfactory job-related factors may help with retention, while 15% believed these factors would attract special education teachers to rural settings. Of the four job-related factors identified, the two major factors participants believed would be most effective in having teachers come/stay were reduction of paperwork and caseload and provision of professional development. Previous studies have cited unmanageable caseloads and excessive paperwork were reasons for teachers not returning to the profession (Berry et al., 2012; Berry & Gravelle, 2018). The findings of this study reinforced the urgent need for creative and alternative strategies to help reduce caseloads and paperwork to recruit and keep teachers in the field as this has been a decades-long problem.

Respondents in this study highlighted that targeted professional training may be helpful in retaining and attracting special education teachers. Other studies have indicated rural special

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educators who experience meaningful professional development report higher rates of job satisfaction and are more likely to stay in the field (Berry et al., 2012; Rude & Miller, 2018; Sindelar et al., 2018). This study re-emphasized the importance of job satisfaction as participants who were satisfied with their jobs were more likely to stay in the field. One way to help with job satisfaction is by providing relevant professional development activities such as training in technology and behavior management. These areas were identified by participants in this study and previous studies (Berry et al., 2012; Rude & Miller, 2018).

In relation to the fourth theme, rural initiatives, nearly one-tenth of respondents identified this factor to be important in recruiting educators. In light of the issues germane to rural special education, participants in this study stated incentives such as *Grow Your Own Programs* and career fairs would be effective in attracting teachers to rural settings. Research has shown intentional recruitment of locals increases the likelihood of retention as educators tend to remain in familiar communities (Mason-Williams et al., 2019). Unlike previous literature which examined individual local factors, participants in this study viewed the combination of rural initiatives as a means to boost teachers coming and staying in rural districts.

Limitations

There were some limitations to the study. First, the study utilized a survey approach, which relies on self-reported data that may be affected by personal bias. Second, this research was conducted in a small, rural remote geographic region in Midwest US with limited diversity, which may limit generalizability of results to other locales. Lastly, the data were analyzed using mainly descriptive methods, and so further research utilizing more inferential methods may be required to increase robustness of data.

Conclusion

The results of this study are of utmost importance as it gives critical insight into special education teacher recruitment and retention in rural remote America. Many rural regions seek to better understand the extent to which special educators leave as teacher turnover can be costly to districts and adversely affect student performance. Teacher turnover negatively impacts student academic achievement as it breaks consistent instruction, reduces the aggregated effectiveness of teachers, and disrupts collaborative efforts which may lead to lower test scores (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Education Research Strategies, 2024; Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Given the harmful nature of turnover, initiatives and policies should be designed to boost recruitment and increase teacher retention as a promising avenue to improve student achievement.

This study provides a better understanding of the factors related to retention and attrition, in rural remote settings. Consistent with past research, special education teachers reported they will come and stay in rural districts with the appropriate administrative and collegial support, financial incentives, job-related factors, and rural initiatives. However, the shortage of teachers has continued to persist. This study emphasizes the need for a combination of innovative practices to help create job satisfaction. Administrators will have to actively play their role by employing emotional intelligence as they provide continuous support to their special educators. While associations between factors and outcomes may not be causal, the results from this study highlight potential strategies to recruit teachers and inform future hiring policies. The results can

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also provide a rationale for systematic evaluations of practices aiming to improve rural special education teacher recruitment and retention. Reducing rural special education teacher turnover is not a pipedream but a great possibility with intentional efforts and appropriate policies.

Future research may focus on practical ways to create job satisfaction in rural settings as research has shown that satisfied teachers stay. Additional research may investigate ways to provide continuous support to special education teachers to help increase longevity in the profession. School districts and educational agencies may explore creative ways to reduce the burdens of job-related factors. Investigations may delve into ways to foster a work-life balance, identifying specific professional development activities that matter to special education teachers in rural districts, and ways to redesign structure to help reduce paperwork and caseload. Further inquiry may look into the difference between the impact of a one-time sign-on bonus and continued incentives for retaining teachers. This research highlights the need for urgent and deliberate interventions to help break the decades-long challenges of attracting and retaining special educators in rural settings. The success of our students with disabilities is dependent on finding and applying applicable strategies that will keep special educators in rural districts.

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