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A Leader's Framework for Teacher Retention

Keeping good teachers should be one of the most important agenda items for any school leader.

(Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 6)

Prin cipals have a critical role in cultivating and keeping committed special educators. For special educators to do their work well, they need the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching students with disabilities. However, highly qualified teachers are not sufficient for strong programs for students with disabilities. Special educators also need the structures, resources, and supports necessary to carry out their responsibilities. Unfortunately, special educators often are not given the necessary supports, and many leave their positions frustrated and discouraged.

The need for committed special educators suggests the need for a broader definition of retention, one that involves not just retaining all teachers, but also the importance of creating environments that sustain teachers' *commitment* to their work (Gold, 1996). It is essential to create supportive environments where teachers have positive relationships with others and have the work conditions necessary to use effective practices.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this era of teacher shortage, school and district leaders need to ask what they can do to retain their special educators. This chapter provides a

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leadership framework for retaining committed special educators and provides an introduction and overview of this book.

THE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Figure 1.1 shows a “big picture” of factors that influence teacher retention. This framework shows that leaders need to focus on two broad considerations: 1) improving teacher quality, and 2) creating positive work conditions. Qualified special educators who work in productive and supportive schools are better able to help students succeed, to know that their teaching efforts have made a difference, and to experience job satisfaction. Teachers who experience these rewards are more likely to be committed to and remain in their jobs (Billingsley, 2004). In contrast, poor work conditions lead teachers to feel that their efforts do not make a difference (e.g., low self-efficacy). It is these feelings of “inconsequentiality” that lead to stress and burnout (Farber, 2000).

Figure 1.1 highlights specific aspects of the work environment that can be altered to improve teacher retention. These *retention-enhancing* actions also describe the conditions for effective programs for students with disabilities. Although aspects of the model add work and expense, some are less than the costs of high turnover. For example, the costs of induction are substantially less than the costs associated with high turnover (Benner, 2000).

The actions in Figure 1.1 are an integral part of what strong leaders do. Even in times of teacher surplus—these factors remain a necessary part of good leadership. Leaders need to assess local circumstances that are contributing to teacher attrition and strategically determine priorities for change. The questions, assessment instruments, and strategic planning model presented in Chapter 9 can be used to assess needs for change.

Approaches to teacher retention that are piecemeal and address only one aspect of the model will yield disappointing results. For example, induction programs will not have a major effect on retention if work conditions are very poor.

Improving Teacher Quality

Figure 1.1 emphasizes the importance of improving teacher quality through: 1) careful recruitment and hiring practices, 2) responsive induction programs for new teachers, and 3) effective professional development opportunities. Chapters 3–5 provide recommendations to address each of these three key areas.

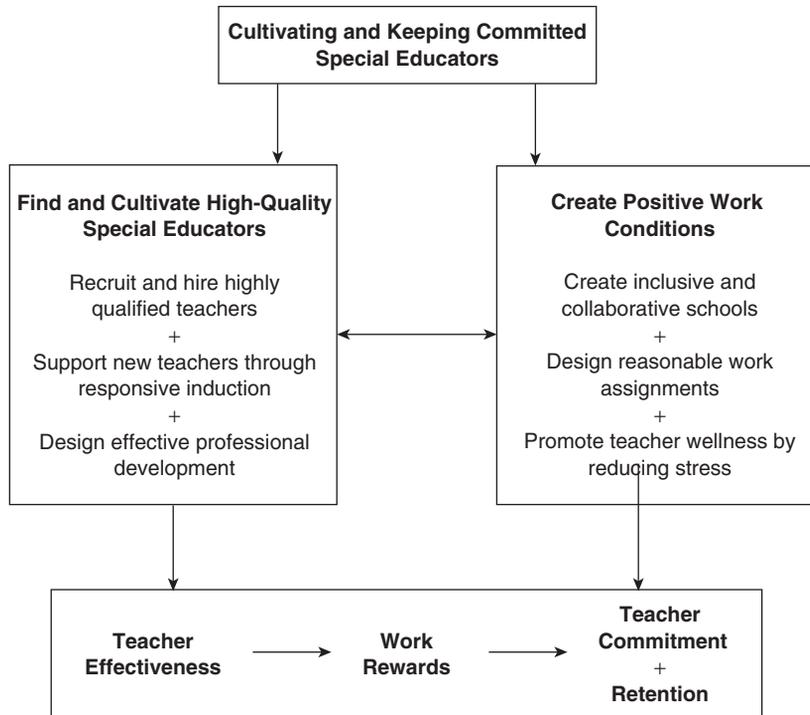


Figure 1.1 A Leader's Framework for Teacher Retention

Recruit and Hire High-Quality Special Educators

The recruitment, hiring, and placement of new teachers can affect teacher retention. Attention to early and systematic recruitment and hiring processes can help leaders find the best possible match for new hires. Thoughtful hiring practices can also assist candidates in making decisions about whether the offered position is a good one for them.

High-Quality Teachers: How Will Leaders Identify Them?

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The quality of our nation's teachers is essential to ensuring that students reach their academic potential. Without effective teachers, it is likely that many of our nation's youngsters will be left behind academically, particularly those attending high-poverty and minority

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schools. Over the past decade, researchers have demonstrated that effective teachers can secure better achievement gains than their less effective colleagues. Over a three-year period, researchers demonstrated that the most effective teachers could secure percentile gains on standardized tests that were considerably higher than their least effective colleagues. Clearly, effective teachers differ from their less effective colleagues, but how?

Background characteristics: Effective teachers have certain characteristics that distinguish them from less effective teachers. They are more experienced, academically able, and have better preparation. On a whole, a more experienced teacher can secure stronger student achievement gains. Each year secondary teachers teach, their student achievement scores increase accordingly. The relationship, however, between achievement and elementary teachers' experience is slightly different. Elementary teachers show gains similar to secondary teachers in the first five years of their career, and then again after fourteen years. Academic ability also seems to influence a teacher's effectiveness. Teachers who score higher on the verbal portion of the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) or Graduate Record Exam (GRE) are more likely to secure better student achievement gains in reading. Likewise, teachers who score higher on the quantitative portion are more likely to secure better student achievement gains in mathematics. Additionally, graduates of more prestigious colleges and universities are also able to secure better student achievement scores. These findings are more pronounced in high-poverty schools where academically able teachers are able to secure even better student achievement gains than they can with the larger school population. Teachers who are prepared to do their jobs also seem to secure better achievement gains. Although findings from the certification literature are mixed, the majority of research studies suggest that certified teachers are more capable of securing better student achievement gains than their uncertified counterparts. Moreover, recent findings from a study of exemplary teacher education programs shows that beginning teachers who received outstanding initial preparation in reading pedagogy were able to secure better student gains on tests of reading comprehension than their counterparts who were less well prepared. Finally, intensity of preparation is related to teaching experience. Teachers who graduate from four- and five-year preparation programs along with those who participate in intensive

alternative certification routes are far more likely to remain in the classroom than those teachers who enter with three months of preparation or less.

Teacher knowledge: Teachers who are knowledgeable about their content area, pedagogical practices, and students tend to achieve the strongest student achievement gains. Teachers who are prepared in their subject area tend to secure better student achievement than those teachers who lack that preparation, and these findings are the strongest for teachers providing math instruction at the secondary level. However, research also demonstrates that subject matter knowledge is not the only important characteristic of an effective teacher. Teachers who have a major or minor in mathematics and have completed education coursework focused on how to teach mathematics secure better student achievement gains than those teachers who only have subject matter expertise. Additionally, teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness and decoding does not necessarily translate into effective classroom reading practice.

This research demonstrates that teachers know more than just the content they are teaching. They know how to put their content knowledge into practice. Research on teacher thinking shows that expert teachers have a deep understanding of content, pedagogical practices for representing that content, curricular materials, and students. They understand the difficulties students might encounter in learning a subject and how curricular materials and instructional strategies might be useful in responding to those difficulties. These teachers not only know a lot, they also understand what to do with their knowledge in a classroom. This complex interweave of different types of knowledge is something that more novice teachers do not have, particularly those who lack preparation in education. Novice teachers with only subject matter expertise struggle with classroom management and lack the pedagogy for representing their subject matter knowledge to students.

Classroom practices: What classroom teachers do is more related to gains in student achievement than any other facet of teacher quality. A recent study of Nationally Board Certified teachers demonstrated that these teachers were far more effective in securing student achievement gains than teachers who did not have certification, and they were particularly effective in raising the achievement levels of students in poverty. These findings suggest that teachers

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identified as exemplary engage in practices that are more effective than their counterparts who are educated and experienced,

So what is it that effective teachers do? Effective teachers provide active, well-structured instruction that engages students. Additionally, they gear instruction to students' academic abilities. For instance, effective teachers have students reading texts at their reading level rather than insisting that all children read grade level material. Their instruction is rich and dense. A moment is never wasted in effective teachers' classrooms. They teach students concepts and skills that are critical to high performance in a content area and motivate students to participate in their instruction. These teachers also provide instruction that is well integrated and focused. For instance, excellent elementary reading teachers give students many opportunities to read connected text and discuss that text while providing the explicit skill instruction that some students need.

Dispositions: Effective teachers are committed to teaching and believe that they can make a difference in the lives of students. Teachers who are able to secure the strongest student achievement gains, particularly among students who are culturally diverse and those who live in poverty, are the ones who believe that it is their responsibility to help students learn. These teachers do not blame students and their parents for poor achievement but ask themselves what they can do to help their students learn more. It is important, however, to recognize that efficacious teachers have the most influence when they work in a school where there is a collective sense of efficacy and commitment to the students, suggesting that specific qualities of the schoolhouse may matter more in influencing teachers' dispositions rather than what the individual teacher brings to the table.

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Support New Teachers Through Responsive Induction

Once teachers are hired, carefully designed induction programs are of vital importance to supporting special educators during these early years. Goals for induction programs need to extend beyond helping teachers survive the first teaching years. Induction programs need to facilitate

teacher learning and growth, and lead to student achievement. Although many states and districts have programs for new teachers, they may not meet the needs of special educators. Special educators have unique needs and concerns that require specific types of assistance. Chapter 4 reviews the needs of new special educators and the actions that districts can take to create responsive induction programs.

Design Effective Professional Development

All teachers need meaningful learning experiences and opportunities to obtain more knowledge about effective practices. Special education teachers who have greater professional development are more likely to feel satisfied with their jobs and report fewer role problems (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Although special educators often benefit from professional development opportunities oriented for all teachers, special considerations are required for them to meet specific goals.

Past models of after-school workshops and inservice programs are being replaced with new models of professional development. These new models emphasize the importance of learning communities characterized by inquiry, reflection, and experimentation (Johnson & Kardos, 2002). Learning communities in special education help improve teachers' practice, increase their sense of efficacy, and prevent burnout (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997). Chapter 5 addresses effective professional development, highlights university-school collaborations for effective professional development, and suggests ways of providing professional development and teacher leadership opportunities for experienced teachers.

Create Positive Work Conditions

Principals support special educators through fostering positive work environments. Special educators who give their schools positive ratings on school climate are more likely to stay in teaching than those who do not (A High-Quality Teacher for Every Classroom, 2002; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). A positive work environment provides teachers with opportunities for teacher success and satisfaction; in contrast, a deficient one contributes to teacher dissatisfaction (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003a).

School and district leaders need to create collaborative and learning-focused school environments in which all students have opportunities to succeed. Leaders need to direct their attention to: (1) creating inclusive and collaborative schools, (2) designing reasonable work assignments, and (3) promoting wellness by reducing stress. Specifically, Chapters 6–8 answer questions including: What creates positive work conditions for

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special educators? How can school leaders help create environments conducive to special educators' work and student learning? How can an atmosphere of collegiality and ongoing learning be developed? How can special educators' roles be designed so they can use their expertise? How can special educators' stress be reduced?

Create Inclusive and Collaborative Schools

Leadership for inclusive schools supports not just special educators, but all teachers and staff as they work to meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Principals support the work of teachers and staff when they explicitly recognize the importance of serving students with disabilities, help to create a collaborative work environment in which special and general educators work together toward mutually defined goals, and assure that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum (see Chapter 6 for eight critical leadership tasks).

The influence of both principal and colleague support can help reduce special educators' isolation and create a sense of belonging in their schools. The creation of positive collegial relationships is an important aspect of supportive work environments. Relationships based on optimism, trust, openness, and respect provide the foundation for collaboration. There is clear evidence that when principals are supportive, teachers experience less stress, greater job satisfaction, and are more likely to stay in their jobs.

Design Reasonable Work Assignments

Well-designed teaching assignments reduce special education attrition and sustain special educators' involvement and commitment. Teachers need to have opportunities to use their expertise, collaborate with their colleagues to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and be protected from unreasonable workloads. Teachers who have reasonable workloads and adequate supports are less likely to experience stress, and are more likely to achieve their goals and experience job satisfaction (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001). These teachers are also more likely to be effective and experience the intrinsic rewards of teaching.

Promote Wellness by Reducing Stress

Attending to the first five activities in the model will go a long way toward preventing stress and burnout in special education teachers. Another approach is to help teachers develop awareness of their own stress, what contributes to everyday stress, and to develop strategies for coping with the strains of work life.

In summary, the above six conditions help create the circumstances in which special educators will see their students succeed. Why teachers stay is linked to the “knowledge that they are making a difference. . . . Doing work that feels good goes hand in hand with doing good work” (Williams, 2003, p. 74).

TYPES OF ATTRITION: A DISTRICT AND SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

There are different types of teacher attrition; terms for attrition include leaving, moving, switching, transferring, exiting, and turnover. These attrition labels have different meanings, depending on how they are used. Although teacher attrition can be viewed from the perspective of school, district, state, or the entire national teaching force, this book takes the perspective of school and district attrition, since the loss of teachers from schools and districts is the primary perspective of interest to school and district leaders.

This book is concerned with voluntary attrition. Figure 1.2 provides a description of two major types of district attrition: “Leavers” refer to those who exit the district, while “transfers” refer to those who stay in the district, but take different positions. Both types of attrition influence the need for special educators, and understanding these various types of attrition can help principals and district leaders recognize possible avenues for increasing retention. Teachers who move to neighboring districts may have different reasons for leaving than those who stay in the district but transfer to general education classrooms.

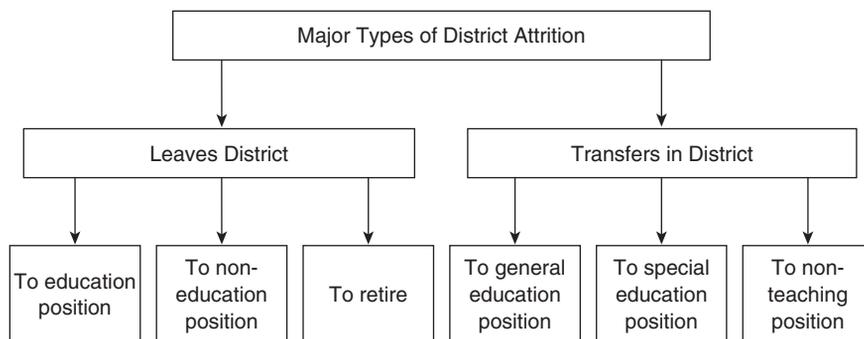


Figure 1.2 Major Types of District Attrition

SOURCE: Recruiting and Retaining High Quality Teachers, the SPeNSF Report. Carlson, 2002.

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Leavers

Leavers are a loss to the district because they must be replaced. Unlike teachers who transfer, they do not serve the system in any other capacity. There are three types of leavers:

- Leave district, but not education;
- Leave education; and
- Leave to retire.

Transfers

Teachers who transfer within the district are usually not as much of a concern as other leavers since they remain in the district. Leavers include:

- Transfers from special to general education positions;
- Transfers to another special education position in district; and
- Transfers to a nonteaching position in district.

The first category includes those who transfer from special to general education positions. Special educators are about ten times more likely to transfer to general education positions than the reverse (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, & Barkanic, 1998). A move to general education has both positive and negative consequences. For example, special educators moving into general education positions may enjoy the change and new responsibilities. Both their students and colleagues will benefit from their expertise. However, in spite of these positives, the special education teacher must still be replaced. Special educators who leave for general education teaching indicate they may be willing to return if they have the possibility of administrative support and better work conditions (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

The teacher in the second transfer category stays in special education teaching, but moves to another position. Leaders may transfer a teacher because they have a particular need in a different school and/or special education program. For example, the director of special education may ask a teacher to move to a middle school special education position from an elementary program. Leaders need to exercise care in these transfers, because if the move is not truly voluntary, the teacher may leave. Alternatively, a special education teacher may request a transfer to another special education position because he or she is either dissatisfied or has another reason for the transfer (e.g., desires to work with older students, wants to work closer to home). Granting such a transfer in this case may help keep that teacher in the district, even if the particular school loses a teacher.

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Teachers in the third category of transfer move to nonteaching positions within the district. Teachers may move to curriculum or leadership positions to meet other needs within the district. Although this represents a teaching loss to both the school and district, these types of moves are beneficial since they meet both individual and district needs. Chapter 9 describes strategies for assessing the impact of different kinds of attrition on the district, as well as specific strategies for gathering information for strategic planning.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The leadership framework for improving teacher retention requires attention to both improving teacher quality and creating positive work conditions.
- Retention-enhancing actions serve as important forms of teacher support and help to create strong programs for students with disabilities.
- Improving teacher quality includes directing efforts toward: recruiting and hiring high-quality teachers, establishing strong induction programs, and providing high-quality professional development opportunities.
- Developing positive work environments requires a focus on creating inclusive and collaborative schools, designing reasonable work assignments for special educators, and promoting wellness by reducing stress.