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Special Educator Supply and Demand in Rural Areas: Facing the Issues

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Special Educator Supply and Demand in Rural Areas: Facing the Issues

The demand for teachers and other qualified public school personnel varies considerably according to regional, state, and local needs. Similarly, it is clear that not all geographic areas experience the same degree of need for special educators. General shortages exist for certain types of special education teachers (e.g., teachers of low incidence populations) and related services personnel, but the need for special educators is particularly intense where geographic isolation, fiscal constraints, and negative stereotypes discourage potential applicants and beginning teachers. Last year, an issue of NASDSE's *Liaison Bulletin* was devoted to factors affecting job satisfaction and the retention of teachers in urban districts. The current issue will focus on rural settings--providing an update on the changing rural demographics that affect general and special education and examining teacher supply and demand issues relevant to rural areas. A final section will provide strategies to address shortages of special education personnel in our nation's rural schools.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE RURAL

One of the problems in interpreting research on rural education has been the lack of a clear, widely accepted definition of "rural" (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; U. S. Department of Education, 1995). Definitional issues particularly affect the collection of valid statistics on schools and students. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau defines "rural" in two different ways. One definition specifies that a rural area is "not urban". "Urban" is defined as either an urbanized area (i.e., places and their adjacent densely settled surrounding territory that together have a minimum population of 50,000) or places with populations of 2,500 or more outside of urbanized areas (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992).

The second Census Bureau definition of "rural" is county based and more widely accepted. This definition draws a metropolitan-non metropolitan distinction. Metropolitan areas are (a) central counties of a large city of at least 50,000 residents and the outlying counties that have "close ties" (e.g., have an urban character, the population consists of commuters to urban areas, etc.) to the central city; or (b) a Census-defined urbanized area and a total central county population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992). Counties that are considered non-metropolitan are outside metropolitan areas.

While both the "urban" and "metropolitan" definitions are cumbersome, the metropolitan definitions have the advantage of a greater wealth of data generally available for counties than for other geographic areas. Some problems in classifying counties remain, however. School districts may span two or more counties. Some "rural" schools may have teachers or students from urban areas, so generalizations about "rural teachers" or "rural students" are difficult (Elder, 1992; cited in U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Also, some studies use their own definitions of rural (e.g., teacher or student self-report). In this paper, no attempt is made to limit the use of the term to any one definition; for each citation, we use the author(s)' own definition of rural.

DATA ON RURAL SCHOOLS

Despite problems in interpretation generated by varying definitions, some data on rural schools do exist. Data reported by Hobbs (1994) suggested that of the nation's 15,133 school districts, 7,145, or approximately 47 percent, could be considered rural. Of the nation's 79,307 schools, 22,142 (28 percent) could be considered rural.

Additionally, of the nearly three million public and private school teachers, 1,109,000 teach in rural/small towns (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

The *Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress* (1995) compared rural and non-rural districts in terms of the prevalence of students within categories of disabilities during the 1990-91 school year. According to the data used for this report, rural and non-rural districts serve similar percentages of students with disabilities, both overall and across disability categories. Rural schools served between 450,000 and 500,000 students with disabilities during the 1990-91 school year (exact figures depend on the data source). During that time, rural districts served a greater percentage of students with disabilities in general education classrooms than non-rural districts. Out-of-district placement rates are the same (5.5 percent) for rural and non-rural districts. There are no readily available data on the numbers of special education personnel employed in rural districts. The *Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress*, while an important source of national information on special education personnel supply and demand, does not disaggregate personnel data by rural communities.

ISSUES THAT AFFECT RURAL EDUCATION

The term "rural America" conjures up immediate images and associations of agricultural and recreational activities, but in fact, both the economy and the demographics of rural areas are changing (Hobbs, 1994; McGranahan, 1994). The common image of rural America belies the diversity of social and economic circumstances of communities that are generally classified as rural; however, certain trends are emerging in much of rural America that could have a major impact on community support for education. In particular, an aging population that does not necessarily support increasing revenues for education.

Demographic Trends. Many of the changes occurring in rural areas can be associated with three demographic trends (Herzog & Pittman, 1995):

- The proportion of the U. S. population residing in rural areas has steadily decreased since 1960.
- Rural areas continue to contain a smaller proportion of the working population (ages 18-64) than metropolitan areas, although the proportion is increasing overall.
- The proportion of rural residents 65 or older has steadily risen since 1960. (The proportion of older Americans is also on the increase in metropolitan areas, but the overall proportion of the increase remains smaller than in rural areas.)

A recent report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO, 1994) indicated that the number of rural children declined by 6.7 percent during the 1980s, but the number of poor rural children rose to 2.19 million during the same period. The GAO report also stated that the rural poverty rate rose to over 20 percent and that poor rural children accounted for 29 percent of all children living in poverty. McGranahan (1994) cited other rural demographic changes that may have a negative impact on rural education. First, contrary to the popular image of a large, extended "rural family," over one-fourth of rural children were living with only one parent. In addition, the number of rural working women has increased. According to 1990 Census figures, more than two-thirds of rural women with children are in the labor force as compared with approximately one-half in 1980. As a result, rural parents may have less time available for parenting and school involvement and a greater need for child care than was once the case.

Economic Trends. In 1990, the median family income in rural areas was about three fourths that in metropolitan areas (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Rural areas also have a larger proportion of working poor with low wages and few benefits when compared to metropolitan areas. Not surprisingly then, rural school districts serve a larger percentage of children living in poverty (22.9) than non-rural districts (20.6), and rural districts are more likely to serve children who live in poverty for long periods of time (U. S. Department of Education, 1995, p. xxix). According to Herzog and Pittman, these economic trends suggest that "in the future, rural education will occur within communities with higher unemployment, lower median family income, and higher rates of poverty than metropolitan areas" (p. 115).

Even without the reduction of resources forecasted by these trends, rural districts continue to face significant challenges to meeting the needs of students with and without disabilities. Rural districts often need to spend more per pupil than districts in more populated areas. Without "economies of scale," expenditures on administration, equipment, and transportation increase the per pupil cost while reducing the funds available for education services (U. S. Department of Education, 1995). Fiscal issues, in combination with geographic isolation and

the devaluation of formal education were cited as having negative effects on rural districts by their superintendents and business managers.

Rural Special Education. A study conducted by NASDSE (Hicks, 1994) asked eight special education directors of rural states to name the most pressing issues in the provision of services to students with disabilities in rural areas. The following issues were cited by all eight state directors, with five specifying personnel recruitment and retention as the most critical issue facing their states:

- Recruitment and retention of personnel
- Transportation
- Low incomes and poverty
- Geographic isolation
- Financial burden of unfunded or underfunded federal and state mandates
- Competing priorities (education vs. focus on survival)
- Parent involvement

To back up these concerns, the Association for School, College and University Staffing (ASCUS) conducts an annual survey on supply and demand for teachers, including special education teachers. They also report on research done by the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. The SASS data source includes questions on both the existence of teacher vacancies in responding schools, and school administrators' views on how difficult it is to fill vacancies in the particular field (Choy et al., 1993). The SASS report includes a break down of demand for special education teachers by the categories of central city, urban fringe (suburban), and rural communities. As noted above, this distinction is mentioned because the operational definition of "rural" may vary from study to study and lead to differing statistics on personnel needs.

According to the results of the ASCUS report (1994) and based on SASS data, 35.0 percent of public school special education positions in rural areas remained vacant. By contrast, for the urban fringe, the percentage reported was 38.3; and for the central city, 42.1. Also for this study, school administrators were asked how difficult the vacant positions were to fill. In rural areas, 29.3 percent of the administrators stated that the vacant positions were difficult-to-impossible to fill, as opposed to 19.9 percent of the administrators in the urban fringe and 26.0 percent of those in the central city.

FACTORS RELATED TO THE SUPPLY OF AND DEMAND FOR RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Portrait of a Rural Teacher. Literature on rural teacher supply and demand (e.g., Ballou & Podgursky, 1996; Stern, 1994) helps to paint a portrait of the rural educator and provides insight as to the factors contributing to attrition among these professionals. Stern, for example, revealed that, at the elementary level, female teachers outnumbered males by a 7-to-1 ratio. Approximately 6 percent of the rural teachers were from a diverse group as compared with 12 percent in non-rural schools during the same year. Stern also found that rural teachers tended to be younger, had less teaching experience, and had less professional preparation than their non-rural counterparts. Further, they generally were paid less than non-rural teachers. Possibly because of this lower compensation, rural teachers tended to engage in more supplemental employment than non-rural teachers. A recent article by Ballou & Podgursky (1996, p.8) confirmed many of Stern's findings and added the following: While rural teachers are just as likely as teachers in non-rural areas to hold standard certification in their principal

field, they are less likely to have graduate degrees or to have graduated from a "selective" college or university.

What does this portrait tell us about the likelihood of turnover among rural special education teachers? Repeatedly, attrition studies have found that youth and lack of experience are associated with teacher turnover (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Ingersoll & Bobbitt, 1995; Singer, 1992). In addition, these same studies reveal that women leave the teaching profession at higher rates than males. Although salaries are not as clearly linked to turnover as age, gender, and experience, better paid teachers tend to stay longer (Singer, 1992). A recent study by Beaudin (1995, p. 472) suggests that salaries also play a role in the pattern of teachers' return to teaching--former teachers are more likely to return to the districts they left, if their original district paid higher beginning teacher salaries and had higher per-student expenditures on education. Ingersoll and Bobbitt also discovered that schools with more faculty with advanced degrees had lower rates of turnover than those with fewer faculty holding advanced degrees.

As can be seen, many of the demographic characteristics of the "typical" rural teacher, together with the characteristics of many rural districts themselves (e.g., small size, isolation, and fiscal challenges), can contribute to teacher attrition in rural schools. There are, however, other issues impacting teacher preparation and recruitment that heavily influence the supply of and demand for special educators in rural areas.

Supply Issues. Marris (1984) suggested that prospective rural special educators generally fall into three categories: (1) individuals who have grown up in rural environments and want to become special educators; (2) individuals who are tied to a specific rural area and become special educators because that is "where the jobs are", and (3) individuals who accept positions in rural areas knowing nothing about ruralness. Several "grow your own" strategies have been developed to tap teacher supply sources already in rural areas. Theobald (1991) described state-sponsored future teacher clubs (including giving students opportunities to work as salaried aides), loan forgiveness programs, distance education opportunities, career ladders for paraprofessionals and other alternative credentialing systems.

The third category of individuals in Marris' schema, individuals who are unfamiliar with rural life, need to be provided orientation opportunities during their preservice program (Helge, 1987). Opportunities to teach in rural classrooms can introduce potential applicants to the positive aspects of rural living as well as the challenges. Rural retention information suggests that preparing individuals for the relatively insular culture of rural life can reduce stress and role confusion and ultimately increase retention. (Luft, 1993; Reetz, 1988).

Recruitment. A recent article on recruitment in Pennsylvania's rural districts (Pesek, 1993) found that substitute teacher lists were the most common recruitment source, followed by newspaper advertising and contacts with institutions of higher education. More costly sources such as the use of directories, direct mail "advertising" and attendance at job fairs and conferences were used infrequently and judged to be less effective. In another article (Luft, 1993), administrators in rural Nevada and North Dakota reported that promoting salary advantages and benefit packages, in addition to developing recruitment packets, were the most successful recruitment strategies.

Even when salary and benefits are on par with schools in urban and suburban areas, remote rural districts must strive to overcome negative perceptions of rural life. Many graduates do not wish to relocate to areas with limited opportunities for meeting people and with few diversions. Luft (1993) noted isolation, lack of services, distance from the university, and lack of social life as factors impeding teacher recruitment, according to rural administrators. Some

authors have found, however, that rural teachers have reported advantages to teaching in rural schools (Ballou & Podgursky, 1996; Matthes & Carlson, 1986). Rural schools tend to offer smaller teacher-to-student ratios, and rural teachers report fewer student management issues, greater feelings of autonomy, and greater levels of support from principals, colleagues and parents than teachers in suburban and urban areas. There are also advantages to rural living in general, including a slower pace of living, lower costs of living, less pollution, and fewer stressors on family life.

Portraying the attractive aspects of rural life and rural schools is an ingredient in successful recruiting outcomes. Often, however, it is a matter of being the first to offer a desirable teaching assignment to graduating professionals. Storey (1993) found that the "teaching assignment" and the consideration of "first or best offer" were the top two factors, respectively, in teachers' decisions to accept a rural teaching position. With this in mind, administrators should look at district policies that require contracts to be signed late in the school year after many graduates have already made other commitments.

Other successful recruiting strategies require additional funds. For example, a manual published by NICHCY (1987) on recruitment strategies suggests selecting and promoting one or more of the following incentives:

- Pay the expenses of the strongest applicants to visit the district;
- Facilitate the search for housing or provide less expensive housing through business partnerships;
- Help spouses of new employees find employment;
- Pay tuition costs for teachers to take additional coursework, attend conferences, or other professional development activities;
- Provide opportunities for summer employment for teachers.

Theobald (1991) made the argument that, because recruitment costs are generally higher for districts and applicants in rural areas as compared to urban and suburban areas, states should seek to "level the playing field" by financially supporting recruitment efforts through travel stipends or other means.

Retention. With respect to rural special education teacher supply and demand, the issue of retention is significant. Attrition rates of 30 to 50 percent for rural special educators have been cited in some early studies (Helge, 1981). Research on turnover clearly indicates that the longer a special educator remains on the job the less likely they are to leave (Singer, 1992) and the longer a former special educator has taught, the more likely he or she will return to teaching (Beaudin, 1995; Singer, 1993). From this research, it is clear that the focus of retention efforts must be on the beginning teacher. For all practical purposes, the first year sets the tone for subsequent professional development and may determine whether or not the new teacher remains in the profession (Gallagher, 1993). The list below provides some suggestions (Gallagher, 1993; Rosenholtz, 1989, pp. 436-437) for strategies that can be implemented at the school level to properly support the new teacher.

- Select initial assignments which avoid placing the new teacher in the most difficult situations or in isolated areas;

- Provide appropriate resources (materials, equipment, financial support) essential to fulfilling the requirements of the position;
- Provide opportunities to participate in decision-making coupled with autonomy in many classroom choices;
- Set clear administrative goals;
- Give regular, clear feedback and specific suggestions for improvement (Note: This type of guidance can be provided by a mentor teacher);
- Provide opportunities for encouragement from colleagues and parents;
- Promote a non-threatening environment that encourages questions;
- Foster opportunities for discussion, resource-sharing among colleagues;
- Provide clear rules for student behavior;
- Provide leadership opportunities for the inductee within the school and community.

As Storey (1993) reported, the lack of family and friends and limited social and recreational opportunities were the first and second most common reasons given for turnover in rural districts. Setting up appropriate activities and responsibilities that gets the new teacher acquainted with school personnel, parents, business leaders, and other community members can go far to prevent the feelings of isolation that can overwhelm newcomers to rural areas. It also can help to establish important sustaining relationships that provide support during challenging times.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING AND RETAINING RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS

There are no panaceas for the need for qualified special education personnel in rural areas. Also, the individual circumstances of a particular public school district must also be considered in developing a strategy for addressing that district's personnel needs. Schnorr (1994) suggested that states could enhance recruitment efforts by creating job banks or employment clearinghouses. Stern (1994) stated that strategies for attracting and keeping rural teachers must take into account "the three C's" -- characteristics, conditions, and compensation. In other words, school administrators wishing to recruit and retain rural special educators need to carefully consider the match between the teacher candidate's characteristics and the rural school. They need to evaluate the effects of policies and school climate on their special education teachers. They also need to consider ways to create incentives for special educators staying in a rural school district. The use of targeted preservice/professional development, technology, career ladder programs, and regional support networks all have potential value for recruitment and retention of rural personnel.

Preservice Training/Professional Development. As noted earlier, many teacher preparation programs fail to address the unique issues of rural education. It has been suggested that preparation programs should emphasize the importance of acknowledging local rural community value systems, stress the importance of using available community resources, and provide actual experiences in rural schools (Helge, 1981).

As part of an evaluation of the effectiveness of Chapter 1 programs, Seltzer and Himley (1995) found that several factors relating to professional development were critical in overcoming the

isolation of Chapter 1 teachers in small, rural schools. The first and perhaps most important factor was developing a schoolwide team that included Chapter 1 teachers, general classroom teachers, administrators, and parents. Second, teachers needed extended planning time with ample opportunity for networking in order to facilitate partnerships among personnel in nearby (and normally isolated) rural schools. Release time for day-long workshops for school improvement planning is necessary. Third, the use of outside consultants to support and nurture schoolwide improvement efforts assists in establishing effective communication linkages between special program and general classroom teachers. Similar building-based approaches would presumably be effective with rural special educators.

Use of Technology. Distance learning may assist in overcoming the problems of isolation and lack of access to preservice and inservice programs. Initiatives using interactive television are now common (e.g., Georgia Interactive Network), and commercial vendors of electronic networks (e.g., America Online) are now offering university level coursework. Further, the use of CD-ROM and multimedia technology offers great potential for preservice and inservice training in rural areas. As stated by Stephens (1994), "the potential that technology holds for enriching the curricular offerings of rural small schools in particular seems irrefutable" (p. 175).

In one experiment using technology in rural districts, interactive television was used to link six rural schools with outside resources (Smith-Davis, 1995a). The interactive technology allowed the schools to act as hubs for the entire rural community. The expanding use of interactive television has clear implications for both preservice training to bring special educators into rural schools and professional development opportunities to retain rural special educators.

Career Ladder Programs. Due to the difficulty in attracting prospective teachers to some rural areas, many rural districts must rely on training residents of their communities. By providing both incentives and opportunities for paraeducators to pursue teacher certification, rural districts may increase their pools of special educators. Paraeducators who complete their program of study and obtain their special education teaching certification often have increased commitment to their district and are knowledgeable about district policies, practices, and organizational culture.

Regional Support Networks. Special educators in rural communities may be extremely isolated from peer contact and support. This isolation may also contribute to a lack of professional development opportunities; therefore, rural special educators may seek professional stimulation in the form of exchanges of pedagogical ideas, methods, and techniques with their peers. In some rural areas (e.g., the Western Maine Teacher Support Network), the establishment of regional support groups has successfully addressed this need. These support groups sponsor annual or bi-annual conferences for rural special educators and attempt to facilitate communication and support among support-group members. A handbook from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory contains descriptions of teacher support networks in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington (Smith-Davis, 1995b). While not specifically designed for special educators, some of the strategies described, such as setting up telecommunications among teachers with similar needs, could be developed for these professionals.

SUMMARY

The isolation of many rural communities makes the recruitment and retention of qualified special educators a substantial challenge for rural districts. Barriers may include the lack of financial resources, the lack of a pool of qualified candidates, and few attractions for graduates

of personnel preparation programs. No simple solutions exist, and strategies to address the problem must be tailored to the individual needs of the district. Nevertheless, potential strategies, such as the use of technology, the establishment of career ladders, and the use of regional support groups, hold some promise for assisting rural districts to address their needs for qualified special education personnel. The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) can provide direction and leadership to these endeavors. Because rural areas tend to cover more than one district, and sometimes extend into other states, assistance and coordination efforts from the state education agency can help achieve economies of scale, and thereby, support cost effective rural recruitment and retention strategies.

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