

## RESEARCH

# Retaining special education teachers in a rural Southern United States school district

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## Abstract

Rural school districts across the United States need help to recruit and retain special education teachers. This study presents findings based on special education teachers' experiences teaching within one rural Southern United States school district. This instrumental single case study investigates the factors that encourage special education teachers to remain in their current position within a rural Southern United States school district. Qualitative data is analyzed from 11 participants: nine current special educators, one special education director, and one retired special education teacher. All participants are from one rural Southern United States school district to gain insight from their experiences and perspectives. Significant findings include factors that positively influence the retention of special education teachers within one rural Southern United States school district: the small scale of the district, administration support, student rapport, positive school culture, extended family living in the local area, and the supportive culture of the rural community.

**Keywords:** special education teacher retention, rural school district teacher recruitment

Teacher retention in special education is a persistent national concern, with novice educators leaving the profession at significantly higher rates than their general education peers. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), nearly 50% of new special education teachers leave the field within their first five years, contributing to widespread staffing shortages. A 2023 report from *USA Today* revealed that 45% of schools across the United States are currently experiencing shortages of qualified teachers, with special education being one of the most

critically impacted areas (Wong, 2023).

These challenges are exacerbated by geographic isolation, limited resources, and high poverty rates. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) shows that 14% of children in rural areas live in poverty, further complicating efforts to provide equitable special education services. This study focuses on one rural school in the Southern United States district to explore the localized impact of these national and state-level challenges and identify key factors that contribute to special education teacher retention in this context.

### **Problem Statement**

The ramifications of teacher shortages extend far beyond the insufficient availability of certified educators. Teacher shortages manifest as disruptions in educational services, inflated class sizes, and a heavy reliance on long-term substitutes, all of which detrimentally impact student learning outcomes (Wong, 2023; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bounds & King, 2017).

High attrition adversely affects teacher interactions, whose collective teamwork is vital for accelerating students' progress. With a constant change in special education personnel, it is more difficult for students and families to establish rapport with special education teachers. School leaders' interactions with special educators are often thwarted or interrupted by the high attrition rates of special education teachers (Vittekk, 2015). Maintaining highly skilled special education teachers is vital to the success of students with disabilities who attend the rural Southern United States school district and other districts across the nation.

As the population of students identified with a disability increases, special education teachers are leaving rural school districts or the profession entirely. Vittek (2015) stated, "13.2% of special educators

leave their jobs each year." Research shows that among special education teachers, almost 50% will leave the field within the first 5 years, even before they become highly qualified. Additionally, attrition rates have led to many vacant jobs that can be filled by uncertified individuals, such that "the high turnover rate has a negative effect on students as well as the district as a whole" (p. 1).

With fewer experienced special education teachers staying in rural school districts, there is a growing need for the mentorship of new special education teachers. Lack of resources often results in a teacher outside of the special education field mentoring new special education teachers. This poses more retention-related challenges for new special education teachers than those being mentored by staff within the special education department. Statistically, novice special education teachers are more likely to leave the education profession due to factors such as high workloads, insufficient preparation, lack of administration support, and challenging working conditions (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). A well-planned mentoring program using seasoned special education teachers is crucial to a new special education teacher's success. This leads to assisting in establishing a more experienced special education teacher workforce.

Furthermore, teacher attrition rates, whether attributed to teachers transitioning between schools, districts, and states or leaving the public education workforce altogether, carry diverse implications not only for the stability of rural Southern United States's teacher workforce but also for the nationwide teaching environment. Bounds and King (2017) emphasized the adverse impact of the departure of qualified special education teachers on student achievement (Bounds & King, 2017). The exit of special education teachers from their roles not only diminishes the

collective effectiveness of all teachers within a school but also disrupts collaborative relationships, which negatively affects the remaining educators.

Subsequently, it becomes imperative to prioritize the retention of highly qualified special education teachers as a crucial factor for enhancing overall student achievement. Consequently, addressing teacher attrition necessitates a unique and multifaceted approach.

If teacher turnover is predominantly linked to educators exiting the profession entirely, it signals a pervasive dissatisfaction that demands systematic efforts to comprehensively address underlying issues (Camp *et al.*, 2023). Conversely, suppose attrition is primarily due to teachers transitioning between schools and districts. In that case, policy solutions should be strategically directed toward understanding the factors influencing their preferences for one educational institution over another. In alignment with this individual perspective, a distinctive instrumental single-case study has been initiated to establish the factors that encourage special education teachers to remain within the confines of one rural Southern United States school district. This study seeks to extricate the complexities surrounding teacher retention, with a specific focus on the inimitable context of special education.

### **Literature Review**

The first step in gaining a highly qualified pool of special education teachers is attracting their interest in a rural school district's special education teaching position. The subsequent step in successfully maintaining qualified special education teachers involves retaining those who are hired. Retaining qualified special education teachers is a revolving door of the replacement cycle of teachers. To further develop the conceptual framework for this study, the literature review is organized into seven

subcategories: (1) recruiting rural special education teachers, (2) the idea of growing your teachers, (3) retaining rural special education teachers, (4) induction/mentoring programs, (5) professional development support, (6) role design within rural school districts, and (7) positive work atmosphere within the rural school culture.

### ***Recruiting special education teachers***

A recruitment strategy implemented by rural school districts in partnership with colleges is exposing college students to teaching practice opportunities within a rural district before graduation. This opportunity, wherein college students are paired with a host teacher, gives future teachers a realistic idea of the conditions associated with teaching in a rural school district. As revealed by Barton (2012), "after surveying participants in the program, the researchers found that even a one-week program can start the change process for pre-service teachers unaware of the opportunities and dilemmas facing those who teach in rural, remote locations" (p. 4). There is a great need to inform potential teachers of the benefits of working and living in a rural setting. Typical benefits are smaller class sizes and less expensive housing costs. Ideally, this strategy attracts teacher candidates who remain in the rural district (Barton, 2012). Teacher candidates placed in rural school districts for their field experience are exposed to the benefits of rural communities, schools, and classrooms, including a safe community environment, strong parental involvement, and a close family atmosphere. The most favorable outcomes resulted from rural districts closely coordinating with university partner schools (Sindelar *et al.*, 2018).

Technology has assisted rural school districts with encouraging results. Many rural school districts have utilized social media for recruitment by advertising

incentives and the benefits of living in their rural community (Sindelar et al., 2018).

### ***The Idea of Growing Your Own Teachers***

Some rural school districts have incorporated a “grow-your-own” (GYO) approach by developing programs that assist in training paraprofessionals employed by the district. Another GYO approach is financially assisting those who plan to return and teach in their community (Barton, 2012). Candidates within the local rural area provide cultural capital that other novice candidates cannot provide (Sindelar et al., 2018).

### ***Retaining Rural Special Education Teachers***

A significant contributor to teacher shortage is simply high attrition. Rural districts must provide a work environment that meets teachers’ needs so that experienced teachers are retained. As Berry (2012) indicated, feelings of isolation can lead to attrition, especially from teachers without personal ties to the rural area. Berry (2012) also emphasized that “a lack of recognition from colleagues, lack of support from administrators, and insufficient assistance grappling with the challenges of their position contributed to rural teacher attrition” (p. 4).

Adequate teacher support by staff and administration is one tool that can increase the likelihood of retaining both novice and veteran teachers. Research by Cullen (2019) reveals that among factors that encourage special education teacher retention, “Fellow special education colleague support was the highest rated out of the most influential factors; it was rated at 84.21% collectively by the special education teachers who were surveyed” (p. 88). Ensuring teachers are recognized and rewarded for their successful classrooms can also promote retention.

A study by Morrison (2013) found that it is essential for novice teachers in rural districts to

“establish relationships with colleagues and school leaders” (p. 130). Morrison (2013) further explained how a novice teacher in a rural school district felt isolated and how “the absence of meaningful and productive relationships with others in her professional environment had significant and detrimental effects on her professional identity” (p. 130).

Although salary is a factor in attracting and retaining novice teachers, Sindelar et al. (2018) showed that financial incentives increased recruitment numbers, but retention still needs to improve over time. “Approximately 15% of new teachers did not return after their first year of teaching, and after five years, nearly half had left the field” (Sindelar et al., 2018, p. 16).

### ***Induction/Mentoring Programs***

Appropriate induction programs can play a vital role in improving the retention of novice teachers, particularly in the field of special education where demands are often more intense and multifaceted. These programs provide much-needed structure and support during the early years of teaching, offering mentorship, professional learning opportunities, and guidance navigating responsibilities like due process paperwork and classroom management.

The success of novice teachers is critical, as Billingsley (2019) noted, “special educators with less experience are more likely to leave” (p. 713). Without intentional support, new special education teachers can quickly feel overwhelmed, isolated, and underprepared for the challenges they face. By implementing meaningful induction practices, especially ones that include mentorship from experienced special educators, districts can help new teachers build confidence, feel more connected, and ultimately remain in their positions longer. For rural districts with limited staffing, strong induction programs are not just beneficial, they are essential. As

technology has improved, it has increased induction opportunities and has provided mentoring that otherwise might not be available. For example, novice teachers can receive additional support remotely from universities via web conferencing, which reduces novice teacher isolation (Sindelar et al., 2018). E-mentoring has also developed as a viable option for some rural districts; Bailey and Zumeta (2015) stated:

State Education Agencies can reduce professional isolation and improve access to professional development by providing innovative approaches to online mentoring. These programs provide new teachers opportunities to engage in professional collaborative problem solving to address challenging situations, navigate complicated state and federal paperwork requirements, and provide immediate access to answers. (p. 44)

Administrators must know the unique support needed for a novice teacher's classroom success to encourage retention. Results of a study by Willis (2019) indicated "the need for administrators who provide support to early career teachers to be knowledgeable about teachers' needs, despite the novice teachers' inability to express the needs specifically" (p. 83).

### ***Professional Development Support***

Research shows that more than monetary rewards are needed to retain teachers within rural school districts. Professional development opportunities, connecting with other rural teachers, and developing and nurturing relationships with parents and the community are also needed for retention success (Barton, 2012). Results of a study investigating special education teacher burnout about job satisfaction indicated that special educators' "job satisfaction includes providing meaningful professional development opportunities and helping them feel

supported by their school" (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 6).

Professional learning communities (PLC) can allow special education teachers to collaborate with other educators and receive professional development with their colleagues. Jones et al., (2013) stated that "with a considerable amount of clarity and improved cultures, educators in professional learning communities report that the job becomes easier when learning communities are in place" (p. 360). PLC groups can support novice teachers with answers to questions that may arise throughout the school year.

### ***Positive Work Atmosphere Within Rural School Culture***

Research indicates that some rural school districts have overcome teacher retention challenges by emphasizing their positive qualities. According to Berry (2012), "researchers have documented how schools that are successful at meeting the challenge of teacher retention have capitalized on the positive qualities found in small, rural school communities" (p. 4).

Billingsley (2019) suggested that "administrative and collegial support and school culture, particularly a culture of collective responsibility, contribute to special education teacher retention" (p. 731). When teachers feel supported by their administrators and connected to their colleagues, they are more likely to remain in their perspective roles, even when faced with the challenges often faced in special education environments. In rural districts, where staff and resources are often limited and teachers must wear multiple hats, a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility can make a substantial difference in the ratings of teacher satisfaction as well as long-term commitment.

The advantages of many rural school districts include smaller classroom sizes, more autonomy for

teachers, a sense of social belonging, and fewer discipline problems; case in point, “the longevity rate for rural teachers staying at one school is an average of nine years. That exceeds the national average of 8.4 years for all public schools and is higher than the rates for both cities and towns” (Barton, 2012, p. 1). Some positive environmental work factors may have a more significant influence on retention than salary alone:

Teachers’ intent to continue teaching in the same rural schools and districts was most powerfully influenced by nonpecuniary factors, including degree of community appreciation and the degree to which teachers perceive the community as being committed to improving and supporting education. (Sindelar et al., 2018, p. 17)

Berry (2012) explained how “special educators who are involved in collaborative relationships with other special educators report lower levels of professional isolation and work-related stress” (p. 4).

Current literature supports the idea that there is a need to discover more about why special education teachers decide to stay within one rural Southern United States school district. There are issues with recruiting and retaining special education teachers within rural school districts. However, there are suggested strategies within the literature for recruitment and retention. Determining factors that influence special education teachers’ decision to stay employed in one rural Southern United States school district is the first step in finding solutions to address this problem of practice.

## Methodology

To discover factors that influence special education teachers’ decision to remain employed with the rural Southern United States school district within this case study, answers to the questions posed in this study

were gathered, coded/categorized by theme, reviewed, and compiled into an analytical narrative of the findings. These results can be used by the study’s school district and similar districts to support teacher retention.

The central research question guiding this investigation is as follows: What factors contribute to the decisions of special education teachers to persevere in their employment within a rural Southern United States school district? This inquiry is perceived as the initial step toward comprehensively addressing the intricate challenges associated with teacher retention in this specific educational context.

To find accurate information directly linked to the research questions posed within this study, Phase 1 involved nine of the ten special education teachers currently teaching within one rural Southern United States school district. Not all ten teachers could participate; one was out of town during Phase 1. The special educators participated in a focus group discussion in which the focus group protocol questions were general questions closely aligned with the research questions posed in this study. Participants were also requested to fill out a demographic data survey form.

Phase 2 of this research consisted of individual interviews with the focus group participants. The special education director of the same rural Southern United States school district was also interviewed, as well as a retired special education teacher who retired from the same district as the other participants. The interview question protocol for the current special education teachers differed slightly from that for the retired special education teacher. Additionally, the interview protocol questions designed for the director of special education were individualized. All interview protocol questions aligned with the research questions posed within this study.

This single case study's primary data collection method was a three-pronged exploration. The method included a demographic data survey, a focus group, and individual interviews. The use of a case study was found to be a more in-depth informational focus on one rural Southern United States school district but may be useful for similar districts throughout the state. The demographic data survey assisted in attaining information about participants that aided in understanding their frame of reference. A focus group interview created an opportunity to gather general data from participants and set the stage for individual interviews to occur later. Individual interviews allowed the researcher to follow up on the focus group questions and helped to explore other questions in greater detail.

Although there were substantial advantages to utilizing a focus group interview within this study, there were also potential disadvantages. Because participants were in the live presence of other focus group members, their answers and opinions might not have been independent. Other focus group participants may have influenced them. According to Ravitch and Carl, this may especially be the case if some members are viewed as more powerful than others which can influence the general answers of other group members (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Discovering factors that promote retention within the rural school district required listening to and analyzing answers directly from special education teachers employed within the district. This approach was optimal for the study since, as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), "qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and to describe in narrative reporting what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them" (p. 7).

Alignment with research questions was accomplished by piloting the focus group and

interview protocol questions with five colleagues. To maintain validity, adjustments were made to the interview protocol questions based on the feedback provided by the pilot participants. The focus group interview took approximately 20 minutes, and each participant's interview took approximately 40 minutes. The data from the focus group and individual interviews explained why the participants chose to teach and remain employed within a rural Southern United States school district. The data also revealed factors discouraging the participants from remaining in their special education position in their rural district.

After analyzing data gathered from the focus group interview, participants were asked to participate in an approximately 40-minute interview that elaborated on the focus group interview with detailed questions aligned with the research questions of this study. Choosing a participant with an administrative role provided information from their perspective regarding strategies used by the district and their perception of which ones provide the most benefit. Participants teaching special education within the rural Southern United States school district provided information regarding their experience and feelings about different teaching aspects. To gain another perspective, a final interview was conducted with a retired special education teacher who taught for over 15 years within the district. The interviews were essential in gathering more in-depth answers in addition to the focus group because more in-depth information was provided as well as multiple perspectives, "one of the most important aspects of the interviewer's approach is conveying the attitude that the participant's views are valuable and useful," as Marshall and Rossman discuss (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 148).

A three-pronged data analysis process is essential for finding accurate data results. The three categories: data organization and management, writing, and

representation, and immersive engagement, were all connected throughout the data analysis process. It is also vital to organize and manage data as data collection occurs by employing a data management plan (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The analysis process was ongoing and analytic memos were taken as the focus group discussions occurred and throughout the individual interviews. After the interviews, reflections were made based on analytic memos recorded during the interviews and transcripts of audio recordings.

During data analysis, significant patterns and differences in question-and-answer data gathered from interviews were coded, which assisted in identifying correlations, themes, and categories of the research data. Coding according to positive or negative correlation findings assisted in developing themes. As said by Bloomberg and Volpe, the primary goal was to report findings in an interesting, credible, and accurate manner (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

The initial step in the case study data analysis process entailed reading and re-reading the data while posing critical questions about the data's identification. Initial coding provided a basis for further examination. During the Open/Initial Coding phase, the first cycle of assigning unique codes to individual data sections occurred. Many units of data from different participants overlapped in code. This was the initial step in developing themes. Saldana emphasized that "one of the coder's primary goals is to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data" (Saldana, 2013, p. 5). During the open coding phase, all the transcript data, analytic memos, and demographic surveys were reread several times while initiating codes according to trends in the data. The data supported the development of themes as each piece of data was reduced and categorized.

Axial coding was utilized during the second cycle.

Saldana explained that "axial coding describes a category's properties and dimensions and explores how the categories and subcategories relate to each other" (Saldana, 2013, p. 209). Critical questions were asked during data analysis to determine the meaning of the data and the appropriate category and theme to which each data set belonged. Subcategories began to develop within central themes of data.

Selective coding was used for the third and final cycle of coding. Kolb explained selective coding as "the process of identifying and choosing the core category, systematically connecting it to other categories, validating those similarities and relationships, and then completing categories that need further refinement and development" (Kolb, 2012, p. 84). During the third coding cycle, the themes in the data developed. It became apparent to which theme the individual pieces of data belonged and how they related to other themes and subthemes.

A thematic data analysis approach was utilized to interpret interview data results. The interview questions and responses were transcribed and organized into a summary of the results. These answers were organized according to the category theme to which each question and response applied, as the analysis process was ongoing throughout this study. Utilizing a thematic data analysis method was vital in the development of the report of research findings accurately and credibly. A successful thematic analysis does not simply summarize the data in themes but rather "interprets and makes sense of it" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353). As a result of a thematic analysis approach, six predominant themes emerged from the data. Each theme contained subthemes that went into greater detail in answering the study's research questions.



The predominant threat to this research study's validity depended on the participants' willingness to contribute and give honest, detailed responses. By not participating, the total number of participants would have been affected, making the data more subject to specific individual experiences, ideas, beliefs, and opinions. It was vital to include specific procedures to ensure that standards of trustworthiness were met. These measures included member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checks involved sharing data with research participants, including interpretations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). When necessary, interpretations of the interview data were shared with participants to ensure clarification.

Peer debriefing involves sharing findings with critical reviewers to "ensure that analyses are grounded in the data" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 46). The study's findings were shared with several colleagues to assist in identifying any weaknesses in the data analysis.

In data triangulation, researchers utilize multiple sources through different methods to gather data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This included analyzing demographic, focus group, and individual interview data to determine whether a second interview with any of the participants was needed to clarify any information in question. This process assisted in gaining insight into factors that encourage a special education teacher to stay employed within one rural Southern United States district. The focus group interview questions and the individual interview questions protocol were closely aligned with the study's research questions.

No research project is perfectly designed; they all have limitations and tradeoffs (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This study relied on potential participants agreeing to participate and giving thorough, honest

answers to interview questions correlated with the study's research questions. Information obtained from the group study could be skewed if any participant's answers were influenced by other members of the group study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data collected from the interviews was subject to the willingness of participants to give candid, complete answers. By making participant confidentiality a top priority in this research, the identities of all participants remained confidential, and pseudonyms were used throughout the findings report. None of the participants were identified or linked by their real name to their responses in the qualitative study, as participant privacy is a priority. Privacy was ensured by assigning a unique pseudonym to each interview transcript instead of using individuals' actual names or school district names. All interview recordings were destroyed after being transcribed. Furthermore, this process allowed continued trust to be maintained with participants.

Participation in this study included the special education director, one retired special education teacher, and all currently employed special education teachers in the district except one who was out of town. Nine of the ten currently employed special education teachers (at the time of this study) contributed to this qualitative single case study for 11 participants. To protect participant identity, pseudonym names were assigned to everyone.

As far as delimitations are concerned, by design, this study limited its scope to just a tiny percentage of all special education teachers across the state who teach in a rural school district. The study's selected group represented the entire population of special education teachers who teach within that one rural school district in a Southern State within the United States. Answers to the research questions depended on the sample of rural school district special education

staff. By focusing this case study on one rural school district and by being able to follow up with more interview questions as necessary, the answers to the study's research questions provided more comprehensive and in-depth answers. Moving forward, these findings may predominantly be helpful to this specific district and other rural school districts in the Southern United States. Some aspects of these special education teacher retention strategies might also be helpful to larger school districts.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Demographic data provided information revealing participants' perspectives. Of the 11 participants in this study, eight had extended family living in the local area, and five of the participants were raised within the local community. The age range of participants was 33 to 69. Degrees attained by participant members ranged from Bachelor of Science to Educational Specialist. Three participants were seeking an additional degree; one of the participants seeking an additional degree was pursuing a counseling degree and planned to seek a position within the counseling field. Key to this study, six of the participants were certified in special education when they began their careers. All of the participants employed by the district were licensed in special education. Of the participants, two were new to the district, and three others considered leaving their job positions after the school year. Of these, one was considering retirement or returning for one more school year, one was planning a career shift into the counseling field within another district, and one wanted to move to a district closer to her family with a higher salary schedule. Experience within the district ranged from 1 to 32 years. Experience within their current position ranged from 1 to 21 years. Only one teacher had a mentor within the district,

and she was in her third year of teaching.

Additionally, one teacher returned from retirement to fill a special education teaching position that would have otherwise remained unfilled. The special education teacher, already retired from the rural school district, was the only one with experience in an urban school district setting.

Analysis of interview data revealed six major categories of environmental influences on special education teachers' decisions to remain employed within their current rural school district. Each of the six core categories contains themes that go into further detail. The six predominant categories that emerged were as follows: (1) encouraging components, (2) discouraging components, (3) hiring and supporting novice teachers, (4) advantages of a local rural community, (5) disadvantages of the local rural community, and (6) strategies recommended for retention.

These six categories, and the themes within each category, assisted in answering the research question posed in this study. By organizing and analyzing the data into six major categories, answers to the research questions posed in this study were revealed by identifying themes. These themes within each category were found by coding and analyzing the qualitative data gathered from the participants through their lived experiences as discovered through surveys and interviews.

### **Encouraging Components**

#### ***Benefits of a Small School System***

Out of the 11 participants, the rural school district's small scale was referred to by nine participants positively. The interviews revealed that participants enjoyed the small size of their classes, the small system, and the small number of staff members.

When discussing what she valued most about

teaching at a rural district, Sophia Perkins mentioned “how small our classes are and that we’re able to build a rapport with our students and see them grow.”

Both novice and veteran teachers articulated how they enjoyed the small scale of the rural school district; in fact, 82% of the participants commented positively regarding the smaller size of the district. This positive factor contributes to why some special education teaching staff decide to remain in their current position in the rural district.

### ***Importance of Administration Support***

Participants spoke very positively regarding their administrators, most notably the special education director. Eight participants in their interviews mentioned how supportive the special education director is. Building administrators were also viewed positively. This collaborative approach between building administrators and the special education director was a factor that participants expressed as something that encouraged them to stay in the rural school district.

### ***Rural Student Rapport***

The data revealed that not only was having the opportunity to teach students within the rural setting favored among staff, but it was also mentioned by 100% of the participants in the study. Participants expressed how working with students provided intrinsic value in their position within the district, thus encouraging all participants to remain in their current positions.

### ***School Culture Characteristics***

Based on interview responses, the rural school culture was highly valued among participants, with nine out of 11 indicating the school culture being a factor that encourages them. The focus group discussion mentioned the school culture's support: “I feel like everyone gets along, willing to try new

things. If they don’t know something, they ask.

We’re all kind of a team here.”

Under the category of encouraging components of teaching within a rural Southern United States school district, four themes emerged from the qualitative data. The themes identified were small system, administration, students, and school culture. All participants referred to at least three themes as encouraging in their decision to remain in their current position within the rural school district. All four themes were indicated by 54% of the participants as a positive factor in their choice to stay in the district. These themes assisted in answering the questions posed in this study as they addressed factors that contribute to special education teachers’ decisions to stay within their rural Southern United States school district.

### ***Discouraging Components***

#### ***Due Process Paperwork***

Often stated as a great source of stress throughout the interviews, due process paperwork was negatively referred to by 82% of the participants. Based on participant interview responses, the stress from due process paperwork was due to the extensive time it takes to develop IEPs and other paperwork associated with special education due process conferences. The legal responsibility associated with special education due process paperwork added to the participants’ stress levels. It was suggested by some participants that time set aside expressly to complete paperwork would assist in lowering their anxiety related to maintaining due process records.

#### ***Communication Obstacles***

A lack of communication was reported as a challenge by four participants. Three participants discussed occasional communication interruptions with their supervisors or coworkers outside the

special education department. Emma Avery, who was in her third year of teaching, discussed a need for more communication she sometimes experienced with general education teachers. Emma suggested more robust communication with general education teachers and building administrators: "I always feel like there's ways to improve better communication. So that would be something they could improve on and have better communication between the general education and the special education teachers, and from the administrators to the teachers."

Although communication was not a significant obstacle reported, the data suggested that communication was essential to participants. The novice teacher was one of the participants who noted communication as an area that could be improved upon, which might be necessary, especially for novice teacher support.

### **Salary Challenges**

Aspects of individuals' salaries were cited in 100% of the interviews with currently employed participants. Participants often mentioned salary as a challenge, and staying within the rural district would be easier if monetary compensation was higher. The only participant that did not mention salary was the retired special education teacher.

Delilah Navarro discussed the salary steps and that she had reached step 19, the highest step for teachers in the district, "my income has stayed steady for the last several years. However, my bills keep going up, and our income keeps staying here." A lack of salary steps was only one factor viewed as a challenge.

The special education director Jasmine Hughes agreed that the district paid less than some larger districts. However, the local economy was different than in larger districts: "Oftentimes the pay is not

as good as it is in bigger districts, but when you live in a rural area, the cost of living you know is usually less than in an urban area."

### **Number of Responsibilities**

Responsibilities were identified as a challenge. Of the 10 participants employed within the rural district, 80% felt overwhelmed with their responsibilities. Several participants had similar challenges as Delilah Navarro, who expressed feeling stressed by having multiple responsibilities but the same accountability: "If you're wearing more hats in a small district, then you're stretched thin. That makes it scarier because it's the same accountability, but you're stretched doing more roles."

Four themes emerged under the category of discouraging components: due process paperwork, communication obstacles, salary challenges, and the number of responsibilities. These themes addressed concerns that possibly discouraged special education teachers' decision to stay within their rural Southern United States school district.

### **Hiring and Supporting Novice Teachers**

#### **Recruiting Strategies**

According to the district special education director, Jasmine Hughes, recruiting special education teachers has been a challenge for the district:

Finding teachers, getting good quality applicants, finding any applicants, you can't. I mean, it's just tough finding people in this area, and it's hard to attract people who are not from this area unless they know somebody or their family or there's some incentive. One of the things as far as how I try to address it is, I reach out, I have a lot of connections, so I try to reach out or contact people to try to get more people to apply; it's hard though.

Special education teacher, Julia Homme suggested advertising how family-oriented the district culture is and “making sure that the new teachers know there is support and that you’re not just going to be thrown in a classroom with no help or assistance. If they know that in advance, maybe they will come and stay.” Julia also suggested the possibility of a sign-on bonus: “A sign-on bonus would probably help if the district could afford that.”

### ***Mentoring of Novice Teachers***

Third-year teacher Emma Avery was the only participant who received mentoring at the district. When asked how she rated her mentoring experience as a mentee, she replied:

Very good. You know, any problem I had, they would help me with, and I had more than one person, you know, more than just my mentor that I could go to help me. So, I felt like I had many mentors to help me learn everything, so yeah, it was very good.

Emma's only suggestion for improvement was “having a meeting once a week and just go over the things that’s going on in your room and make sure that you’re staying on task with things and see if you can improve things.”

In reflecting on the mentoring process, director Jasmine Hughes stated that in addition to teaching aspects of special education, she tries to ensure that due process training is included as an essential part of the mentoring process. Gordan Hewson had a similar comment, suggesting a more hands-on approach to mentoring: “I would say more hands-on, showing things one on one, and more of the due process side.”

### ***Advantages of Local Rural Community***

#### ***Grew up in the Area***

Of the 11 participants, five grew up in the local area and viewed growing up locally positively.

Sophia Perkins discussed how she has enjoyed living in the rural community: “It’s a close-knit community. I’ve lived here all my life.” Growing up and having family roots in the local area seemed to encourage participants to stay.

### ***Extended Family***

When discussing the local community, eight of the 11 participants mentioned families living there. Even after retiring, Penelope Farrell stayed in the area because of family: “Actually, because my family was here, I wanted to retire here.” Delilah Navarro commented, “I’m still here because my family’s here, we own a home here, and my roots are here.” The extended family in the area seemed to influence participants’ decision to remain there.

### ***Supportive Culture***

When discussing the local community, six of the 11 participants mentioned how supportive the community can be. During the focus group, someone stated, “I like the fact that everybody knows everyone, so they help you out. If someone has cancer, everybody shows up to lend a hand.”

Three themes emerged in the advantages of the local rural community category: growing up in the area, extended family, and supportive culture. These themes addressed factors that participants enjoyed about the local rural community they teach. These positive attributes of the local rural community contribute to special education teachers’ decision to stay within their rural Southern United States school district.

### ***Disadvantages of Local Rural Community***

#### ***Fewer Opportunities and Resources***

According to participant interviews, there are generally fewer opportunities and resources within this rural community than in larger communities. Of the 11 participants, six mentioned fewer opportunities

as a negative aspect of their rural community. When discussing the disadvantages of the local community, retired teacher Penelope Farrell mentioned not having a hospital or any industry jobs for younger people:

Sometimes you don't have access to things you need, resources like medical facilities. Other disadvantages would probably be the economy, and of course, we have no industry of any kind in this area, so our children have to move away after high school for college.

### **Prevalent Poverty**

Low income in the area was attributed by four of the 11 participants as a negative characteristic of the local community. Diana Evans mentioned that poverty may rise in the local area: "It is a poor district, it's gotten worse, but I think it's just the economy, and I wouldn't live anywhere else; it's a special place."

### **Strategies Recommended for Retention**

#### **Income Increase**

During the interview process within this case study, participants suggested several retention recommendations. 100% of the participants currently employed within the rural school district suggested an increase in income in some form. This was the only recommendation made by all participants currently employed; the only participant who did not mention raising income was the retired special education teacher. Julia Homme who offered a creative suggestion:

I thought for teacher retention that if every five years, special education teachers had some type of stipend or bonus along with their salary, or even if it was just a flat rate of \$500. Or, I mean, something small would even help keep teachers longer.

All participants currently employed within the district discussed salary as an area the district could improve upon. Several suggestions were made, such as extending teaching contracts, adding steps to the salary schedule, or having a stipend according to how many years a teacher stays within the district.

#### **Due Process Support**

Six of the 11 participants mentioned extra support for due process paperwork, making it the second most popular strategy proposed for retention. Gordon Hewson offered an idea from a previous school district he had taught at that was supportive: "We had a clerical assistant, so they handled all of the conference notifications and set up the conferences, which helped out a ton. I think that would help retain teachers."

#### **Administration Support/More Inclusive**

Of the 11 participants, four mentioned that administrative support was necessary. Paul Sumner felt it was essential to have positive leadership to set the culture of the school campus: "Administration support, I feel like the administrator could make or break a school year for teachers and students. A positive administrator that allows a teacher to do his or her job is going to go a long way." When explaining what administrators could do to support her more, Julia Homme commented: "Just including me more, not planning necessarily, but just information that would help me better benefit my students. That way, I could help other special ed teachers that struggle that are new."

#### **Novice Special Education Teacher Support**

Only one participant, Emma Avery, was considered a novice teacher with two years of experience. Emma's mentoring experience was positive as her mentor was a certified special education teacher, whom Emma felt was highly supportive of her professional growth. Emma also

reported that other special education teachers were supportive and explained how she felt comfortable asking questions due to her colleague's approachability and willingness to assist.

Emma mentioned two factors that discouraged her: the responsibilities of filling many different job roles and sometimes feeling overlooked due to a lack of communication with administrators. Being a smaller district, sometimes extra duties and responsibilities were given to Emma, which caused her to feel overwhelmed while learning new responsibilities as a novice teacher. While Emma reported that administrators were supportive, she felt that sometimes when building information was dispersed, she was omitted.

When asked about strategies the district could utilize to support and retain novice special education teachers, Emma specified a higher salary, more administrative support, and a more inclusive environment for special education teachers. Emma was not alone in her suggestion of a higher salary, as all of the participants recommended a raise in pay as an area the district could improve upon.

## Recommendations

The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Southern United States school district?* This study is significant because it provides qualitative data from the perspective of nine of the ten special educators within a rural Southern United States school district and the factors influencing their decisions to stay. The rural Southern United States school district might find this research valuable in retaining special education teachers. Other rural districts with a similar problem might find this research helpful in

developing special education teacher retention strategies.

Several positive attributes that participants reported within this study are also reflected in the literature. Positive factors that encouraged participants to stay in their current position within a rural Southern United States school district were rapport with students, the small scale of the district, positive school culture, and administration support (primarily via the special education director). There were also encouraging factors within the local community, such as extended family living in the area, the supportive culture of the local community, and participants growing up locally.

## Recruitment of Teachers Who Stay

Of the 10 participants employed by the rural district, 50% grew up in the local area, and 70% had extended family living there. The district may want to consider the correlation between the participants in this study and the advantages of having extended family in the community. Seventy-three percent of the participants had extended family living in the area, and 55% grew up within the local community. By investing training efforts in people from the local community, the district could benefit from filling open teaching positions and offering high school students interested in pursuing a teaching career elective educator course as an introduction to a teaching career. These courses may encourage high school students to pursue a teaching program in college.

According to the data, participants enjoyed the small scale of the district and the supportive culture within the district and local community. Participants also found supportive administration as an encouraging factor in their decisions to stay in their current position within the district. These are assets the district could also underscore when advertising available teaching positions.

## **Salary Increase**

Some discouraging findings within the rural district found within this study were also reflected in the literature. Jasmine Hughes, the special education director, reported on her challenges in finding and hiring licensed teachers.

Based on qualitative data, the rural school district could use recruitment strategies such as emphasizing the positive quality-of-life factors of the local community since some of these factors compensate for lower salaries. Barton (2012) discusses how it is essential to inform potential teachers during recruitment of the advantages of working and living in a rural setting, such as smaller classes and cheaper housing. The district's small scale is a positive attribute to consider and emphasize in recruiting efforts. It can assist in offsetting the lower salary compared to larger, more urban school districts.

All of the participants (100%) in this study currently employed by the rural school district suggested some form of higher salary as an improvement the district could attempt. Suggestions included days added to their contract (which would also help with completing due process paperwork), steps added to the salary schedule, or providing a stipend according to how long teachers have been in the district. Participants also suggested higher salaries so their district could compete more with neighboring districts.

Unfortunately, not all rural school districts can afford to raise salaries. Therefore, creative solutions might make various types of salary increases feasible. For example, the district could develop a grant application committee for special education teachers and administration to assist with expenses. Bailey and Zumeta (2015)

emphasized how applicable applying for federal grants could be for rural districts, "help rural LEAs maximize federal funding opportunities for special populations. Investing in staff with grant writing skills, along with training and targeted support from SEAs, can increase rural LEA participation in federal grant initiatives" (p. 47). Another option is if the rural school district could collaborate with other rural districts within the state to produce appeals to the state's legislative representatives for budget increases that might assist in funding salary increases.

The district could also explore possible school loan forgiveness programs for rural special education teachers. Rude and Miller (2018) suggested utilizing "policies that provide loan forgiveness to government-sponsored loan program recipients for employment in rural and hard-to-fill positions" (p. 27).

## **Administrative Support**

Although only 27% of the participants in this case study reported occasionally feeling overlooked by administrators from a lack of communication at some point, improvement in this aspect could be crucial in bolstering retention rates. Rude and Miller (2018) stated that "the demands placed on special education professionals are unique in rural school environments for a variety of reasons, which may include social or professional isolation" (p. 26). Administrators could prioritize communicating directly with special teachers, especially those with less experience.

Utilizing the rural school district's collaborative and supportive culture, ensuring that special education teachers can continue participating in PLC learning groups, is a strategy the district is currently utilizing. Special education PLC learning



groups could collaborate with neighboring rural school districts' PLC learning groups, especially now that online meetings have gained popularity. Harmon (2005) reported that "collaboration among schools can contribute to important school improvement" (p. 2). Harmon (2005) further explained that collaboration between school districts could also positively affect students' academic success. Rude and Miller (2018) stated that "the best investment that can help to assure the retention of highly effective educators in rural communities is the provision of high-quality professional development programs" (p. 28). Given the high mobility rates of students in rural areas, increased collaboration between school districts could offer valuable consistency and support, not only for the students transitioning between schools, but also for the educators who serve them. Strengthening connections across districts can help ensure that students experience smoother academic and social transitions, while also giving teachers a broader professional networking system, shared resources, and a greater sense of community.

Strategies for more support with due process paperwork and conferences were also mentioned by participants, such as adding extra days or adding scheduled blocks of time to complete due process requirements. According to the participants, the district currently holds annual reviews during April and May. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a student's IEP must be reviewed annually and active at the beginning of each school year. There are no restrictions on which month an annual review can be held during the school year. Therefore, the district might consider holding annual review conferences throughout the school

year so that conferences are more equally distributed to ease the stress of due process paperwork.

The district could also hire substitute teachers to fill in for special education teachers once each quarter to allow special education teachers an opportunity to collaborate with the special education director while preparing due process paperwork. According to this case study, this strategy might be more feasible than raising salaries. It would support special education teachers by providing more time to prepare and maintain due process paperwork.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

The outcomes of this investigation complement those of earlier studies. The insights gained from this analysis suggest that the rural district involved in this case study should consider utilizing positive aspects of the district when recruiting new teachers. Attributes include the small scale of the classes and staff, encouraging administration, and collaborative school culture. Current special education teachers view the rural community as supportive. Recruitment efforts could include information about the local area's advantages.

The rural district might provide extra time for special education teachers to prepare due process paperwork. Administrators could diminish some duties for special education teachers, allowing more time for due process paperwork preparation. The district should be aware that special education teachers must be included in all lines of communication and in disseminating information shared with general education teachers.

If feasible, the district could add steps to the salary schedule, a stipend according to the years a teacher is employed or add days to special education teachers' yearly contracts. Extending

contracts will give special education teachers a higher salary and extra time to complete due process paperwork. Other options with a less fiscal impact would be to spread out Annual Review Dates and provide quarterly meeting times to address paperwork needs.

## Conclusion

Utilizing the findings discovered from this study, the rural Southern United States school district within this case study could lower the attrition rates of special education teachers. It is vital to take steps to lower attrition rates to provide more consistent special education services from teachers who have established a rapport with their students and their families. To support teacher retention, the results of the study indicated that the district in this case study should address the following:

1. Recruitment – includes positive factors regarding the district work environment and the community in recruitment efforts. Utilize local talent and encourage future growth by offering introductory teaching courses at the high school to possibly encourage students to consider a career in education—partner with colleges to offer student-teacher opportunities for college students in the special education field.
2. Administrative Support – diminish some duties for novice special education teachers, allowing new teachers time to acclimate to their new responsibilities. Distribute annual review conferences

throughout the school year instead of holding conferences only in April and May to assist in alleviating time constraint stress for participants. Provide a substitute teacher for all special education teachers on the same day once a quarter to allow special education teachers an opportunity to collaborate while developing due process paperwork. Have the building administration arrange a meeting with special education teachers to discuss strategies that will assist in being more inclusive of special education teachers by distributing information.

3. Salary Increase – If feasible, the district could consider a stipend for teachers according to how many years they have taught there. For example, every fifth year of service within the district, a teacher could receive a stipend according to what the district could financially afford. Another consideration, if possible, would add steps to the salary schedule.

Rural school districts across the United States are challenged with recruiting and retaining special education teachers. This single case study identified factors that encourage the recruitment and retention of special education teachers within a rural Southern United States school district. Other districts with a similar problem of practice can utilize these strategies to create support plans to meet their own unique needs.

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