

Foreword

Currently the U.S. educational system is marked by significant controversy, as increasingly higher student achievement outcomes are sought for all students, including those with disabilities. While there is much controversy regarding the particular approaches that should be used to improve outcomes, all seem to agree that teachers are the single most important influence on student achievement. Sanders and colleagues (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997) have made this point most boldly, in noting that, over a period of years the quality of the general education teacher contributes more to student achievement than *any other factor*, including class size, class composition, or student background. More specifically, their research has demonstrated that students who are assigned to the most effective general education teachers for three consecutive years score as many as 50 percentile points higher on achievement measures when compared to students who are assigned to the least effective teachers during a comparable period.

There seems little doubt that special education teachers are at least as important as general educators—perhaps more so—in ensuring high achievement levels for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are only labeled once they have failed to make adequate progress in a general education teacher’s classroom. Thus, in addition to the skills and knowledge that are required of a highly qualified general education classroom teacher, special education teachers are required to have specialized skills for addressing unique student needs; extensive knowledge of highly effective, evidence-based practices; and the ability to collaborate effectively with other teachers to ensure that students with disabilities make academic and social progress that enables them to be successful in life. In short, special education teachers are the key to ensuring a high-quality education and good achievement outcomes for students with disabilities.

Despite the widely recognized need for highly qualified special education teachers, we have been unsuccessful in ensuring an adequate supply of these teachers for America’s classrooms. In the fifty states and the

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District of Columbia, approximately 400,000 special education teachers are hired each year to teach school-age students with disabilities. During the 2001–2002 school year (the most recent available data from the U.S. Department of Education [www.ideadata.org]), over 12% of these teachers, serving over 900,000 students with disabilities lacked the basic certification to effectively meet student needs. The shortage of fully certified teachers in special education has grown significantly in recent years, and is now greater than any other area of certification, including the more widely publicized shortages of math and science teachers (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004).

Adding to the problem of ensuring that all students with disabilities have highly qualified teachers is a high attrition rate among special education teachers (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, & Barkanic, 1998; Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Barkanic, & Maislin, 1999). Within four years of beginning to teach, over one-half of all special education teachers either leave the profession altogether or transfer to general education. Perhaps as important, during this same four-year period, those who remain in special education frequently migrate from one school to another, seeking a more satisfying role and better working conditions. More specifically, every four years, approximately 40% of all special education teachers move from one school to another, either within their current district or without. Finally, perhaps the most alarming statistic regarding special education teacher attrition, is the transfer rate to general education. Special educators are ten times more likely to transfer to general education as general educators are to transfer to special education (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). If this statistic were reversed (i.e., ten times more general educators transferring into special education), the special education teacher shortage would not exist.

These statistics reveal an extraordinarily high level of instability in the special education teaching profession, resulting in teachers moving in and out of special education classrooms at a disquieting rate. Teacher attrition, coupled with migration from school to school, has a significant adverse effect on student outcomes. For example, we know that it takes four to six years to become an accomplished teacher—many special education teachers do not remain in the profession long enough to reach this level of competence. We also know that effective special education teachers collaborate with other educators to change their schools to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met. It often takes five or more years for these changes to occur, and most special education teachers do not remain in one school for this period of time. Thus, special education teachers often do not remain in a school or the profession for a long enough period to either become an accomplished professional or to work

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toward the necessary changes in a school to ensure the success of students with disabilities.

Although these statistics can be quite depressing, it is important to remember that at least in one important sense they are “just statistics.” While they reveal important trends, they do not reveal the reality that exists in every school in America. Moreover, there are many schools with dedicated, highly qualified special education teachers who remain in their positions for many years and achieve extraordinary outcomes for students with disabilities. For example, my colleagues and I have worked with many schools on school improvement-related activities, and these schools invariably have had a highly qualified special education faculty that have remained at their schools over a long period of time. Clearly, the single most important factor in these schools that ensures a strong, stable special education faculty is a supportive school principal (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, 2002). What these principals seem to do is to provide a context in which special education teachers have a manageable role that allows them to achieve the moral purpose for which they entered teaching (i.e., to make a difference in the lives of the students they teach).

Over the last fifteen years, our knowledge has advanced to the point where we have a relatively strong knowledge base regarding how to recruit highly qualified special education teachers into the classroom and keep them there. For example, we recognize that beginning teachers are, in fact, novice teachers; they are not accomplished professionals. Thus, novice educators need strong induction programs, a mentor or mentors to work with as they learn about their school and teaching, and ongoing professional development tailored to their unique context and needs. Unfortunately, this knowledge base is often not translated into practice.

Bonnie Billingsley has done an exceptional job of synthesizing and applying available research in this book, while offering a range of effective and proven strategies that principals and district administrators can use as they seek to identify, recruit, support, and retain highly qualified special education teachers in their schools. I am hopeful that many principals and district administrators who seek to improve outcomes for students with disabilities will read this book and incorporate many of the ideas presented. Indeed, these strategies offer principals the potential to provide a grassroots support system for ensuring that all students with disabilities have highly qualified teachers and achieve outcomes that result in success in school, thus creating many options for a successful life beyond school.

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