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The Benefits and Challenges of Rural Special Education Teachers: Improving Teacher Retention in Rural Districts

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The Benefits and Challenges of Rural Special Education Teachers: Improving Teacher Retention in Rural Districts

Abstract

Preliminary findings from our systematic review of the literature underlines the positive aspects as well as the unique challenges special education teachers face when they are employed in a rural school district. Rural districts struggle with unique challenges related to hiring and retaining high qualified special education teachers (Bargerhuff et al., 2007; Berry et al., 2011; Horn, 2021; Mueller & Brewer, 2013). This poster presents a synopsis of the review of the literature and provides recommendations for professional development opportunities in geographically isolated areas.

Introduction

Per the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), a rural area is “any population, housing, or territory NOT in an urban area.” Specifically, a rural area is defined as the area of 5 to 25 miles from an urban area (Gevert, 2015). Nationally, rural school districts represent nearly 20% of the student population in the United States, but limited attention is given to the unique needs of these areas by national policymakers (Johnson et al., 2018). Rural schools face multifaceted challenges that often impede educational opportunities and post-school outcomes of students, including those who receive special education services (Erickson et al., 2012; Test & Fowler, 2018). Recruiting and retaining qualified special education teachers is also a challenge in rural school districts (Bargerhuff et al., 2007; Berry et al., 2011; Horn, 2021; Mueller & Brewer, 2013). The shortage of highly qualified special education teachers in rural areas is reported to be as high as 35% (Brownell et al., 2005). Lack of financial or human resource capacity negatively contributes to students with disabilities' education (Johnson et al., 2018). Therefore, professional development opportunities are essential in supporting and preparing teachers in geographically isolated areas. Despite the challenges, there are positive aspects of working in rural areas that may contribute to teachers' decision in being employed in rural districts.

Purpose

Given the unique characteristics in rural districts, a systematic review of the literature was conducted to examine the struggles involved in finding and retaining qualified special education teachers in rural districts and recognizing the benefits of working in geographically isolated areas. The purpose of the review was to present the benefits and challenges of teaching in rural schools and provide professional development opportunities for improving teacher retention in rural districts.

Initial Findings



Figure 1. Professional Development Opportunities for Improving Special Education Teacher Retention in Rural Districts

Benefits of Teaching in Rural Schools

- Positive relationships with students and parents (Davis, 2002)
- Less challenging student behaviors (Berry & Gravelle, 2013)
- Active parent participation (Provasnik et al., 2007)
- Close collaboration with colleagues and administrators (Berry & Gravelle, 2013)

Challenges of Teaching in Rural Schools

- Geographic isolation (Berry et al., 2011; Berry & Gravelle, 2013).
- Students with a wide range of disability diagnoses on teachers' caseloads (Berry et al., 2011; Horn, 2021).
- Limited resources, restrict travel, and access to effective professional development (Berry et al., 2011; Brownell et al., 2005; Horn, 2021).
- Compared to urban districts, rural districts are more likely to employ less qualified special education teachers (Berry et al., 2011; Mueller & Brewer, 2013; Rude & Miller, 2018).

Conclusion

No doubt, recruitment, and retention of highly qualified teachers can be a challenge for many rural school districts (e.g., Bargerhuff et al., 2007; Berry et al., 2011). Special education teachers are often responsible for meeting the educational and social/emotional needs of students with a wide range of disability diagnoses, and many have reported feeling inadequately prepared to do so (Berry et al., 2011; Muller & Brewer, 2013). Effective professional development opportunities are imperative in supporting and preparing special education teachers, especially in rural school districts. In addition, research in rural education has highlighted many positive qualities that influence rural special education teachers, including positive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Meeting the needs of special educators in rural settings may contribute to teacher satisfaction, and therefore, could help in recruiting and retaining special education teachers in rural districts.

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