Jan Richards (2004) described the top principal behaviors we have come to call the “Golden Ten.” These rules have helped principals to balance school demands while retaining an experienced faculty despite research showing that nearly half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years of working, many due to job dissatisfaction (Ingersoll, 2003). Retention is particularly critical for special education teachers. We determined to study this problem after hearing from a principal who told us that, no matter what she did or how she behaved, her special education teachers were the most likely to quit, and that most did so after only a year or two.

In an era when school accountability measures focus on closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities, retaining special education teachers is a necessity. An examination of schools designated as “in need of improvement” reveals that achievement levels of special education students present a major obstacle, highlighting the need for experienced special education teachers to remain in the classroom. Our survey sought to identify the most important factors principals and special educators believe are helpful in retaining special education teachers.

The Survey
An initial literature search revealed nine retention factors that were consistently endorsed across studies:

- Administrative support;
- Atmosphere;
- Salary;
- Student behavior;
- Material;
- Personal issues;
- Facilities;
- Student skill; and
- Student background.

With support from the Oregon State Department of Education, we wrote to all the special education teachers and principals in the state, asking them to “rank the degree to which these nine factors influence the ability of schools to effectively retain special education teachers.” Recognizing that new teachers would likely have different needs than veterans, we also collected information about respondents’ level of experience. A total of 359 special education teachers and 133 principals completed the survey.

The Results
The perceived importance of each factor contributing to retention are illustrated across years of experience: little (1-5 years), some (6-10 years), moderate (11-15 years), and extensive (more than 15 years). At each level of experience, respondents (both principals and teachers) ranked the top three reasons why special education teachers stay on the job (see Figure 1).

We found that for both teachers and principals administrative support is perceived as the most important factor contributing to retention, with 70 percent to 80 percent of all respondents ranking it as one of the top three reasons teachers stay on the job. While Richards’ Golden Ten supports the validity of this finding, we found that examining respondents by profession and experience level provided new and important information. For both principals and special education teachers, salary and school climate (atmosphere) ranked as the next most important factors for retention. However, teachers perceived salary to be the second most important factor while principals perceived climate to be more important than salary.

While principals tended to report that student behavior influences retention, this factor was seldom identified by special education teachers. Conversely, nearly half of special education teachers perceive access to classroom material as one of the top three reasons for retention, whereas only one-quarter of experienced principals saw it as important. Other factors, such as personal reasons, student skill level, student background, and quality of the facility, were rarely identified by either principals or teachers.
The Implications
Administrators committed to the retention of special education teachers can make use of this information by providing differentiated treatment based on teacher need. In general, the needs of early- and late-career teachers are similar. Teachers of special education from all levels of experience need administrative support, fair salary, and a positive school atmosphere to stay on the job. To put it in practical terms, the four most important strategies for retaining special education teachers, according to our survey, are:

- Provide administrative support;
- Pay teachers a fair salary;
- Foster a strong and positive school climate; and
- Provide access to sufficient and high-quality classroom material, especially for new teachers.

Our findings are clear. Support from school administrators matters most for retaining special educators. This is good news for principals because it is a factor over which they have some control. They can tailor their retention efforts to best meet the needs of individual teachers by noting the relative importance of each of the other factors for teachers with different levels of experience. For example, student behavior and school atmosphere are more important for veteran teachers, while new teachers require appropriate materials to be successful. Surprisingly, none of the student-centered factors—behavior, skill, or background—was identified as important by our sample of administrators and teachers. This should come as good news for principals because these factors are not under their direct control.

Our survey study suggests that while most factors impacting retention are similar across experience levels, a few vary. For this reason, a single retention strategy for all special education teachers may be too simplistic. In general, administrative commitment to the four strategies identified in this study may help to increase the retention of our nation’s special educators.

References


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