

**RETENTION OF TEACHERS IN RURAL KENTUCKY**

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher retention has been of interest to educational researchers for over three decades. Various reasons for special education teacher attrition have been cited, including student discipline and motivation problems, working conditions, low salary, and a lack of administrator support. This descriptive survey research sought to determine the present status of completers of an alternative certification program in mild-moderate disabilities at a state-supported university. The study sought to determine if teachers completing the licensure endorsement program were still teaching in special education programs, why they may have left, and to obtain their perceptions of the preparation program's effectiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

The need for qualified teachers in America's elementary and secondary schools has been a subject of a significant number of studies in the past twenty years. In the mid-1980's two widely disseminated reports focused attention on the coming shortage of teachers ([National Academy of Sciences, 1987](#); [National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983](#)). Due to increasing student enrollments and the aging of the present teaching workforce, these two reports predicted a commensurate increase in demand for new teachers. These predictions have been upheld by numerous other studies, including studies which delineated the shortages in specific teaching fields, such as math, science and special education ([Boe, Bobbitt & Cook, 1997](#); [Grissmer & Kirby, 1997](#); [Weisbaum & Huang, 2001](#)).

Concern over teacher shortages and the retention of current teachers has given rise to continued research on the topic. In the late 1980's the National Center for Education Statistics began the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) in an attempt to track the phenomenon. Each year SASS sends out surveys to over 50,000 teachers in a random sample to obtain data on teacher staffing, shortages, and retention. A companion study, the Teacher Follow-up Survey, was designed to focus specifically on the reasons why teachers leave the profession. These studies continue today.

Higher standards in the public schools have affected millions of disadvantaged students who are at-risk for not graduating from high school. Educational reform, with its increased emphasis on testing, has placed more strains on educational systems trying to accommodate increasing numbers of these at-risk students. To meet the needs of these students, approximately 40% of public school districts have alternative schools and programs, approximately 50% of which involve accommodations for students with special needs ([National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005](#)).

Many of these programs are focused on students with special needs who are at risk of dropping out of school for a number of reasons including poor grades, truancy, suspension, and pregnancy ([Paglin & Fager, 1997](#)). As a result, teachers may face special challenges and concerns when teaching this population of students. The need to recruit and retain quality special education teachers in programs and schools with large numbers of at-risk students was recently highlighted in a report by the [National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools \(2005\)](#). The report described the necessity for proper pedagogical preparation to work with at-risk students, improvement of school conditions, and a focus on retention of quality teachers through various incentives.

## TEACHER ATTRITION AND RETENTION

With respect to teacher turnover, [Ingersoll \(2003\)](#) defined two types: teacher attrition, which refers to teachers who have left the profession entirely, and teacher migration, which denotes teachers who have transferred to teaching jobs in other districts. While teacher attrition results in a loss of an individual from the teaching profession, teacher migration also has implications for schools, as it still results in teachers that must be replaced.

Teaching is a large occupational category in the U.S., representing four percent of the entire nationwide civilian workforce ([Ingersoll, 2003](#)). However, when compared to other occupations, teachers exhibit higher rates of turnover than many other professions. Whereas the overall average across all occupations in the U.S. is about 11% per year, the rate for teachers has been as high as 15.7% in certain years ([Bureau of National Affairs, 2005](#)).

This turnover is costly to individual schools and school districts. One recent national estimate of the cost of replacing public school teachers who have left the profession of teaching cast the cost at \$2.2 billion a year. Adding in the costs of teachers transferring to other positions and/or schools increased the cost to \$4.9 billion every year ([Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005](#)).

Beginning teachers are more likely to leave the profession ([Harris, Camp & Adkison, 2003](#)). Twenty-five percent leave by the end of their first year ([Norton, 1999](#)), while almost 40% have left after five years ([Ingersoll, 2003](#)). As those who stay accumulate teaching experience, they are more likely to continue in the teaching profession. These continual departures put a strain on schools, as a "revolving door" can be created, especially in poor rural or inner-city schools. With respect to special education teachers, 60% have been shown to leave within six years ([Heath-Camp & Camp, 1990](#)).

Studies have delineated several reasons why teachers leave the profession. Dissatisfaction with the job, which can include such aspects as low pay and poor working conditions, has been shown to be a primary reason ([Anderson & Sinha, 1999](#); [Weisbaum & Huang, 2001](#)). Teachers leave to pursue careers in other occupations and industries, sometimes for better pay, and sometimes for personal and/or professional advancement. In addition, the U.S. has been experiencing a "graying" of the teaching workforce in the past two decades, as many teachers have retired. However, retirements only contribute to 12% of the total number of teachers who leave. The greatest percentage (28%) leaves due to school staffing cutbacks due to lay-offs, school closings, and reorganizations ([Ingersoll, 2002](#)).

Many young teachers who choose to leave within five years of beginning their teaching careers often cite a lack of preparation to cope with the challenges of teaching, particularly in public schools. The ability to deal with challenging students (behavior problems, those with a lack of motivation, special populations), along with a lack of administrative support has been defined as a primary reason. New teachers also mention a lack of opportunity for professional development and professional advancement as two other reasons for their departure.

Western Kentucky University found the following changing patterns with the exceptional education teacher candidates compared to how it was even five years ago.

- More middle-aged and older students.
- More variation in previous knowledge and experiences.
- Combination of work and education, as more embrace the concept of life-long learning.

- Greater student movement between colleges and universities.
- Better knowledge of instructional technology.

Faculty have developed a new program model, the Master of Arts in Education Learning and Behavior Disorders, P-12 (MAE), that increases both the *capacity* and *quality* of teachers while helping students from underrepresented populations to overcome barriers to participation. This new model has improved the *capacity* of our program by implementing strategies to serve students for whom the program is currently inaccessible, including students who are employed and unable to enroll in a full-time program, students who are not able to commute to campus, students who can not afford tuition, and students who have difficulty negotiating barriers to participation due to disability. Structural improvements to increase their responsiveness to the needs of these diverse students include the use of on-campus programs, interactive distance education technology and course delivery, and on-line web delivered courses. Western Kentucky University (WKU) continues to develop a comprehensive program that allows for maximum accessibility for students.

The *quality* of the MAE program has also been improved in several ways. WKU has implemented a number of strategies and activities to make the program more field-based, multi-disciplinary and competency-based. In addition, this enhanced program emphasizes culturally sensitive practices for effective teaching in high-poverty, demographically diverse rural schools. While maintaining the high standards of academic rigor that are the hallmarks of the program, the specific revisions and enhancements include: (a) the use of cohort groups to facilitate the growth of peer support and collegiality; (b) more intense and extensive field-based activities and course assignments that focus on culturally competent teaching, including projects requiring multidisciplinary collaboration and practical projects with a direct impact on participants' schools and K-12 student achievement; (c) development and expansion of the Professional Development Networks, which included trainees' cooperating/mentoring teachers in the trainees' field placements, members of Advisory Councils, Parents and Advocacy Groups, and Departmental faculty; and (d) restructured internships and classroom experiences to assure that competent teachers are trained, who will continue serving students and not leave the field in three years to five years.

## **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

The design of the ARTC/MAE is based on the following principles.

- Teacher education is a continuing professional process
- Expertise is required of all teachers
- Graduate training is enriched when viewed as a dynamic and on-going interaction between faculty and students.
- The field experiences of M.A.E. students are a rich source of authentic application and coursework inquiry.

Student demonstration of the *benchmarks* for each of the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program (KTIP) Teacher Standards listed below determines program success.

- Design and Plan Instruction
- Create and Maintain a Learning Climate,
- Implement and Manage Instruction,
- Assess and Communicate Learning Results,
- Collaborate with Colleagues, Parents, and Others
- Articulate the goals of and engage in Professional Development
- Present Accurate and Pertinent Content

- Reflect/Evaluate Teaching/Learning
- Demonstrate Professional Leadership.
- Demonstrate Implementation of Technology

In helping graduate students maximize their professional development, the ARTC/MAE in LBD welcomes a partnership with school districts in preparing future teachers who can clearly visualize their role, actively greet complexity with reflective and creative thinking, constructively confront challenge, securely meet the demands of innovation or change, and truly value learning as a life-long process. The Directors of Special Education from cooperating districts serve as the Advisory Board to the program. Field practitioners working with the cohorts are K-12 partners. Instruction in this program is student centered with faculty and school district personnel assisting, guiding, and leading, rather than directing candidates. Graduate students in the programs are responsible and accountable for their own professional development. Faculty, administration, and school district personnel are responsible and accountable for providing sequential, viable, and supportive instructional opportunities for student learning.

The content knowledge and skills requisite for meeting the program's standards are provided through ten courses in the 30-hour program of the ARTC/MAE in LBD. Candidates are admitted in cohorts each summer and fall. Since the program began in June 2002, over 431 students have been admitted, 155 have graduated and are still teaching, 272 are currently completing programs. Cohorts are currently operating in Owensboro, Elizabethtown, Russell Springs, Glasgow, Bowling Green, and Cyberspace.

Faculty and school practitioners have struggled to design performances that will highlight the effect teacher candidates are having on K-12 student achievement. Innovations are beginning to develop the research base necessary to validate these processes. As this work continues, exciting possibilities are being identified.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this research was to describe the current occupational status of program completers of Western Kentucky University's Master of Arts in Education, EXED preparatory program. The study also sought to ascertain the perceptions of completers regarding the quality of the preparation they received in Western Kentucky University's program.

With respect to the recent report by the [National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools \(2005\)](#), which described the importance of adequate preparation for teachers in order to work with special needs populations, it was deemed necessary to evaluate the extent to which program completers were choosing to remain in the teaching profession and how preparatory coursework may have contributed to their retention. The feedback provided by this questionnaire was intended to allow for analysis and improvement of required coursework in order to better serve current and future students.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research tracked the career choices of program completers and linked their evaluations of the preparatory program with retention in the teaching field. Specifically, the study addressed four research questions:

1. Are program completers currently employed in the field of education?

2. Are program completers currently employed as LBD teachers?
3. What are contributing factors related to the employment status of program completers?
4. What are program completers' perceptions of the preparation they received prior to assuming a classroom assignment?

## **PROCEDURE**

### **Population**

The population for this study was program completers of Western Kentucky University's Master of Arts in Education, LBD preparatory program between the academic years of 2002 and 2003. Emailing lists for this group were developed from departmental files with the assistance of graduate students in the department. The entire population was surveyed. As the population for this study was limited to western Kentucky University's program completers, results of this study are limited to this group. The initial population was comprised of 148 program completers with current LBD license endorsements. The license status of subjects was verified with the Kentucky Education and Professional Standards Board, which allows a user to access certificate details for individuals by last name and school district. Upon investigation, it was discovered that the licenses of two subjects were not accessible and another three could not be found, which indicated the licenses may have been suspended, revoked or never gotten. Removing these subjects from the population reduced the number of subjects to 143. One hundred and twenty three respondents returned the survey instrument for a response rate of 86.01%.

### **Data Collection**

The population received a cover letter, survey link, and a thank you for their participation. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study, guaranteed participant confidentiality, explained the response tracking method, and provided contact information in the event of participant questions or concerns. Confidentiality was ensured. The respondents' answers were assumed to be an accurate reflection of their understanding of the questions. The research instrument consisted of four sections:

1. Demographic information to ascertain education-related employment data, educational attainment, etc;
2. Short statements related to the anticipation of leaving the teaching field and/or attrition from the field utilizing a ranking system;
3. Rankings of the perception of preparatory course material in relationship to specific on-the-job teaching responsibilities; and
4. Space provided to elaborate on any questions answered or additional comments.

Approximately two weeks after the initial emailing, all non-responders received a second emailing of the same contents with an updated cover letter. Several surveys were returned due to incorrect email addresses. A third and final mailing was conducted approximately two weeks after the second using school addresses for the remaining non-respondents. No further attempts were made after these three rounds.

## FINDINGS

Findings are reported for each research question under corresponding headings. Specific comments made by respondents are included where appropriate.

### **Question 1: Are program completers currently employed in the field of education?**

Of the 123 respondents, 121, or 98.37% of respondents, indicated employment in the education field. The remaining two respondents, comprising the residual 1.62%, were not employed in an education related field.

### **Question 2: Are program completers currently employed as LBD teachers?**

One hundred and eighteen respondents (95.93%) were still teaching in a LBD classroom. Five (4.06%) were employed as teacher consultants or assistant principals. Respondents presently in the education field, but not in the classroom, reported that their ability in the classroom had led to the other opportunity and assignment. The two who were not teaching were working for the juvenile justice system.

### **Question 3: What are contributing factors related to the employment status of program completers?**

All respondents currently in the education field did not anticipate exiting the field of education in the next five years.

Only three respondents (2.47%) cited dissatisfaction with the job as justification for planning to leave the field. No respondents who had already left the field of education cited job dissatisfaction as their rationale.

### **Question 4: What are program completer's perceptions of the preparation they received prior to assuming a classroom assignment?**

The majority of respondents deemed the preparatory courses at Western Kentucky University to be "adequate" in all of the teaching responsibilities surveyed. Of particular interest were perceptions regarding preparation to educate students with complex special needs, engage in collaboration with general education, provide differentiated instruction, and facilitate life planning. With respect to the education of students with complex needs, 43.8% of all respondents considered the preparation received to be "adequate" while 23.6% deemed their preparation "inadequate."

Respondents who had little experience with students with complex needs perceived a definite need for information to work with these students. On this topic respondents included comments such as "I was a bank teller for 15 years prior to taking the LBD position. The type of student I am now dealing with is very different."; "Administrators feel the student creates discipline problems and lowers test scores."

Preparation for collaboration with general education teachers was deemed "adequate" by 44.9% of all respondents, while 22.5% thought it "inadequate."

With respect to providing differentiated instruction, 48.3% of all respondents deemed preparation to be "adequate" and 19.1% "inadequate."

Preparation to offer life planning was thought "adequate" by 47.2% of all respondents, and "inadequate" by 20.2%.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Nationally, statewide, and in South-central Kentucky where Western Kentucky University is located, there is a critical shortage of special education teachers. The states report a chronic shortage of over 27,000 fully certified special education teachers, along with an annual demand for approximately 28,000 new special education teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In greatest demand are teachers of specific learning disabilities, emotional disorders, and mental retardation (42%, 17%, and 17%, respectively, of all additional teachers needed). When considered in geographic terms, the need is greatest in rural and inner city areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The demand for special education teachers increases yearly, and is expected to increase at a faster rate than that of other occupations through at least the year 2015.

The national shortage of special education teachers is paralleled in Kentucky and in South-central Kentucky. The small, rural school districts characteristic of South-central Kentucky report extreme difficulties in attracting qualified special education teachers. South-central Kentucky, where Western Kentucky University is located, has more than its proportionate share of these personnel needs. In 2002, the two KDE superintendent regions in the area (regions two and six) had a total of 600 special education positions in high incidence disabilities that were either unfilled or filled by personnel who were not fully certified. This figure represents over 50% of all teacher shortages in the two regions.

There is a two pronged problem of recruitment (not enough enter the field) and retention (those who do leave in 3 to 5 years). This research project will provides evidence that the Western Kentucky University graduate is not leaving the field. This counters a national trend and data for the past decade. The findings are limited due to population size; they do provide hope if the trend continues.

With respect to the respondents' preparation to teach, it appears the biggest concern for these individuals is working with complex needs special populations. Some teachers may have received little training in working with this group as part of their initial teacher preparation, and may have little practical experience in this area prior to taking an LBD position. Since LBD programs have historically not targeted this group, the respondent's concern, and desire for perhaps more preparation in this area, is understandable. The same may be true for the area of collaboration with general education, they may have little in the way of orientation to the general education setting, and establishing relationships with the general education teacher may be a new responsibility for them. This same shortcoming may also be true for another noted area, life planning.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendation appears warranted:

*Expansion of the study to the other institutions in Kentucky.* It may be useful to see if these patterns are true in other parts of the state.

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