

Rural administrators put a great deal of time and ingenuity into the effort to recruit and retain qualified personnel. Their strategies range from "Home Growing" to telethons.

# Recruiting and Retaining Special Educators in Rural Areas: Strategies from the Field

by Judy Smith-Davis  
*Counterpoint*  
Fairfax Station, Virginia

Rural and remote districts have long reported difficulties in recruiting special education teachers and other personnel. In addition to experiencing the national shortage of teachers in some disciplines, rural districts are often hampered by their distances from population centers, their sparse populations (which reduce the numbers of local people in the reserve pool), potential applicants' lack of knowledge about or desire to move to rural areas, lower salary levels (in some cases), and other factors (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Handicaps, 1983). Turnover is also high in rural areas. Helge (1984) estimated a 30-50 percent attrition rate in rural areas, and Ludlow (1985) reported 90 percent turnover rate every three years in the Appalachia school districts he studied. "Teachers in remote schools typically follow one of two patterns. Some stay for many years or for a lifelong career; others stay for one or two years and then depart" (Scott, 1984, p. 3).

Rural superintendents and other administrators put a great deal of time and ingenuity into the effort to find and keep good teachers. Some of their ideas are described here, as reported through the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989) and other sources.

In Kansas, the High Plains Educational Cooperative combines human-interest recruitment efforts with opportunities for training to attract people who will thrive in rural Kansas. These efforts are focused particularly on recruitment of special educators and feature "Home-Grown Train-

**Judy Smith-Davis is currently a consultant in electronic networking for GTE Education Services. She is a Past President of the CEC Teacher Education Division and former Chairperson of the CEC Publications Committee.**

ing," by local teacher trainers to develop a "Home Grown Product" (certified local personnel with local relationships). Joining High Plains in this program are the Southwest Kansas Area Cooperative, Liberal Public Schools, Garden City Public Schools, Fort Hays State University, and Panhandle University. Advanced degree course work is provided at rural sites, with practicum experiences in local summer programs. Skills acquired during training are supported by the unique background knowledge of the rural setting possessed by the "Home-Grown Specialist." These training opportunities, the realities of rural special education, and human values are emphasized in the High Plains recruitment literature (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989).

The Pinal County (Arizona) Special Education School retains good personnel by stressing an attitude of liberating them to function at their best and most autonomous levels, providing needed resources, and offering opportunities for professional development and advancement. The school's reputation for high quality programming and success with students who have moderate to severe disabilities also contributes to its low turnover rate and success in recruiting outstanding educators. In addition to a \$4,000 per year recruitment advertising budget, the school sends its teachers to the Council for Exceptional Children's Convention each year, where they act as recruiters (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989).

Maine's Collegial Support Network for Rural Special Educators was organized in 1986 to reduce the rate of attrition among special educators. Nine regional support groups have been formed, each with its own coordinator, and regional teacher academies and peer support and problem-solving meetings are in progress. Sponsored by the Maine Department of Educational and Cultural Services, this network should lead to reduced feelings of isolation among rural special educators, as well as mutual support, exchange of information, and sharing of teaching strategies (American Council on Rural Special Education, 1988).

North Carolina's statewide recruitment efforts center on 341 outstanding teachers (one from each high school in the state, urban and rural), who are appointed to serve as teacher recruiters for their schools and districts, with stipends of \$300. In addition, eight regional Teachers of the Year are given release time to serve as Regional Teacher Recruiters for one year, working directly with the Teacher Recruitment Office of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. These regional leaders assist recruiters in their regions, identify good candidates for teaching careers, disseminate information on financial aid, visit junior high and middle schools to encourage students to consider teaching careers, work with business and civic groups on ways to make teaching more rewarding, and work with higher education institutions to enhance their recruitment efforts. North Carolina also has a state scholarship program and has developed a comprehensive campaign for marketing teaching careers (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989).

In New England, the Northeast Common Market Project serves as an example of cooperation that might be achieved by other contiguous groups of states. Participants are Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont, and these states are exploring ways to increase the supply of educational personnel and considering the establishment of regional certification (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989).

Career ladders for aides are extremely useful, because they tend to develop local people who will remain in the rural area. A number of programs have emerged to give paraprofessionals the training necessary to become teachers,

among them the cooperative program between the State University College at Buffalo and local schools. The Buffalo program is particularly concerned with enrolling aides from ethnic minority groups, because of the alarming decline in minority representation in the teaching force. The program is designed to meet the non-traditional needs of aides who are seeking the development that will lead them into professional positions (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989).

Among all efforts to recruit and retain qualified personnel, two stand out:

- Induction or mentorship programs for new teachers (as a retention practice); and
- The assignment, training, and nurturing of peer tutors, with encouragement and stimulation to consider teaching when they prepare for careers.

A striking percentage of personnel already in special education report that early positive experiences with individuals who have handicaps was an influence on their career choices (Smith-Davis and Cohen, 1988). Extended efforts to provide such experiences to young people is one way to increase their interest in preparing for special education careers. Peer tutoring not only gives students positive experiences, but it also multiplies instructional resources available to students with special needs. The peer tutoring experience is enriched if training, incentives, and collegial encouragement are provided, as has been demonstrated in Oregon, where the University of Oregon sponsored a conference for high school peer tutors in conjunction with a statewide special education conference. This 1985 conference was attended by 140 students representing 21 high schools in Oregon, with support from the Oregon Department of Education. "The purposes were to develop the roles, skills, and attitudes of non-disabled tutors, relative to their roles as friends, trainers, and advocates; to develop a system of reinforcers to help teachers recruit and maintain high-quality tutors; and to provide career and professional development opportunities to tutors" (Cohen, Barnett, and Jessee, 1989).

Because a disproportionate number of teachers leave the field within the first five years of their careers (Bogenschild, Lauritzen, and Metzke, 1988) the support offered by induction programs is thought to be a substantial measure for retaining personnel. Typically, induction programs provide first-year teachers with advice and consultation by experienced mentors in their school buildings and usually include continued training and periodic evaluation of performance, with assistance where improvement is necessary; in some cases, higher education faculty members cooperate with the school to provide mentorship and supervision (Smith-Davis and Cohen, 1988). Induction or mentorship programs are frequently operated at the district level, although states such as Utah and New Mexico are initiating statewide teacher induction initiatives.

Finally, among other useful recruitment and retention ideas being implemented in various states and districts are the following (Smith-Davis and Cohen, 1988):

- Telethons are used in some communities to recruit teachers and volunteers. In addition to informational segments, call-ins are encouraged from interested viewers.
- Through Future Teachers of America and Student CEC organizations, it is possible to identify and encourage capable students early in high school and to provide them with encouragement, incentives, and career information.
- Multi-district recruitment fairs can feature interviews, videos, displays, performances, and printed information on open positions, benefits, and community factors.

- Many teachers who leave the profession eventually return. The educational access and public access channels of local cable television systems are untapped resources for displaying career information and job openings to this reserve pool in the community.
- In some areas, the schools, higher education, local businesses, and citizens have formed alliances to address teacher recruitment and retention. The incentive package may include discounts and free services or products from local businesses; recognition programs with bonus awards contributed locally; professional development opportunities; mentorships; adjunct faculty status; and other elements that increase the reward value and status of teaching in the community.
- There are growing numbers of state-sponsored tuition grants, student loans, stipends, and scholarships for persons entering training in high-demand teaching fields.
- Sometimes supplemental salary increments are added for intensive or extra duty by teachers. Such increments might be supported by a local educational foundation, such as has been established in some communities, or by a corporate endowment. Salary supplements may be useful, not only for attracting personnel, but also for stimulating existing personnel to retrain for shortage areas.
- Community groups and organizations can do much to make teachers feel appreciated, through recognition programs, awards, volunteer activities, and other forms of participation with teachers in the schools.
- The printed recruitment materials from some state offices (notably North Carolina's) feature brochures that describe the minority population in the state, the careers of minority individuals in education, and the opportunities and needs for persons from minority backgrounds in education. These materials value the minority individual and show that the state is a place where persons from minority groups will feel a sense of belonging.
- Some districts have a planned program whereby teachers may rotate among specialties. For example, after teaching for two to three years in behavior disorders, a teacher might have the option of spending a year in the general education classroom or electing some other position in the public schools for a year, before returning to special education. This practice not only expands the insights of teachers but is also thought to reduce burnout.
- In dealing with personnel shortages, districts may use extended day, extended week, or extended year programs to serve more students with existing personnel. Increased deployment of paraprofessionals helps extended programs succeed.
- Some districts use retired teachers as part-time volunteers or paid staff members to engage in team teaching or perform other duties.
- Some higher education institutions send student teachers to rural and remote areas to serve as paraprofessionals and substitutes. In these roles, trainees are given responsibilities that tend to integrate them into the community and school system. This practice appears to work particularly well if student teachers serve in pairs or teams in the same rural area.

## Conclusion

Rural and remote districts deal daily with the intertwined issues of quality (of instruction, programs, curricula) and quantity (of resources and personnel). These issues often make it difficult to commit to move beyond the compliance level and invest in enhancing the quality of education at the building level. Once a rural district decides to go for quality, however, it usually finds that its recruitment needs are greater than they were before. By the same token, once a rural district or school becomes locally, regionally, or nationally *famous* for the quality of its educational programs, recruitment becomes easier. Good teachers like to be associated with good schools and school systems.

Good rural and remote schools could become laboratories for the preparation of master teachers (which, in a very limited and local sense, they are now). The skills of the successful multi-grade teacher could be examples in the training of all teachers. The small rural school could become the formative experience in many teachers' lives—a proving ground and a springboard. Thus, the small rural school could become excellent in ways that would resolve its recruitment difficulties, while improving education for students and teachers alike.

## References

- American Council on Rural Special Education. (1988, Spring). 1988 ACRES exemplary program award recipients. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 9(1), 29-30.
- Bogenschield, E.G.; Lauritzen, P.; and Metzke, L. **A study of teacher attrition**. Washington, D.C.: National Association of State Directors of Special Education/National Clearinghouse of Professors in Special Education.
- Cohen, M.; Barnett, R.; and Jessee, C. (1989, Summer). Recruiting personnel for education: A sampler from SpecialNet. *Counterpoint*, 9(4), 4-5.
- Helge, D. (1984). The state of the art of rural special education. *Exceptional Children*, 50, 294-305.
- Ludlow, B. (1985). Influences on rural teacher employment. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 6, 24-26.
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Handicaps. (1983, November). **Educating handicapped students in rural America**. Rosslyn, VA: Author.
- Scott, R.J. (1984, September). **Teaching and learning in remote schools: A dilemma beyond rural education**. Rosslyn, VA: National Information Center for Children and Youth with Handicaps.
- Smith-Davis, J.; and Cohen, M. (1988, December). **Recruitment and retention of personnel: A review of useful practices** (craft), Eugene, OR: Western Regional Resource Center.