Teacher burnout and attrition are epidemic in the field of special education. The annual attrition rate for special education teachers has been estimated to be between 8% and 10% (Whitaker, 2000), and special education teachers are leaving the field in much greater numbers than their peers in general education (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002). Nationally, there is a persistent annual shortage of approximately 29,000 fully certified special education teachers (Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Terbanian, 1998).

High teacher turnover creates expense and hassle for schools and districts and it also affects students. The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) (2002) reports that limiting teacher turnover enhances both student learning and teacher quality and urges school administrators to develop and implement plans to lower their teacher turnover rate.

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When special education teachers are asked why they left or intend to leave the field, they cite such reasons as large caseloads; burdensome paperwork; problems with behavior management; and difficulties relating to their general education colleagues, administrators, and parents. However, teachers’ decisions about whether or not to remain in the field are probably due to an interaction of several of these factors.

**Four Strategies for Principals**

Several studies mention the role of principals in special education teachers’ decisions to remain in or to leave the field. For example, in a study of more than 600 general and special education teachers, Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross (1994) found principal support to be necessary for teachers’ sense of well-being. Researchers have also found principal support to be positively related to teacher retention (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Littrell et al., 1994; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Principals can use four strategies—prioritizing collaboration, being personally supportive, handpicking mentors, and emphasizing continued learning—to increase retention rates for special education teachers.

**Prioritize Collaboration**

In their review of the literature of occupational stress and burnout among special educators, Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) found professional interactions to be a significant source of stress for teachers, which contributes to lowered feelings of self-efficacy. In addition, teachers often cite the lack of opportunities to collaborate with general education colleagues as a serious problem (Gersten et al., 2001). Special education teachers need the time, opportunity, and support to collaborate with their general education colleagues on a regular basis. Because 75% of special education students spend a significant part of their school day in general education settings, such collaboration benefits general and special education teachers as well as their students (SPeNSE, 2002).

In the SPeNSE (2002) study, special education teachers who had opportunities to collaborate with their general education colleagues reported using the time to discuss how to incorporate work on students’ individualized education program (IEP) goals into the general education setting, to provide general education teachers with the information and resources to address students’ learning and behavioral needs, and to explain how students with special needs benefit from inclusion.

Shoho, Katims, and Meza (1998) report that to minimize stress and burnout, administrators should “create structures that enhance professional collegiality across traditional boundaries and a professional environment that values all participants” (p. 22). For example, they recommend adopting a problem-solving process to aid general and special educators in finding solutions to problems with individual students. At a time when both general and special education students are being held to higher standards and special education students are required to be given access to the general education curriculum, such collaboration is necessary for student success (President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

**Be Personally Supportive**

Research shows that principals can play a pivotal role in mediating other factors that cause special education teachers to leave the field. For example, principals can support teachers in the area of discipline and behavior management and in their dealings with parents. Principals can also support special education teachers by obtaining necessary resources and materials (Sires & Tonnensen, 1993). If principals have such funds available, the Council for Exceptional Children (2001) recommends significant clerical and technological support to help special educators manage the burden of paperwork.

Special education teachers often feel a lack of recognition for their work by principals and other teachers, which contributes to stress and burnout (Gersten et al., 2001; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Through direct personal contact, principals can help ensure that this does not occur. Such contact is also related to feelings of optimism and camaraderie in a working envi...
Littrell et al. (1994) found principal support to be highly related to job satisfaction among special educators. Teachers rated emotional support as being the most important type of support to receive from principals. Emotional support includes seeking teachers’ input in decision-making processes, taking genuine interest in their work, and showing support and concern for their students and their programs (Littrell et al., 1994). Also of importance were appraisal support, which shows respect for and confidence in teachers’ judgments and actions; instrumental support, which helps teachers directly with their work; and informational support, which provides teachers with opportunities to learn and assists with knowledge of legal policies. Littrell et al. (1994) conclude that principals should “provide an atmosphere of optimism and camaraderie rather than an environment of competition and confrontation” (p. 307).

Other studies have also cited a positive school climate as a factor that contributes to teachers’ decisions to stay in the field of special education (Gersten et al., 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Gersten et al. (2001) stress the need for building support among teachers and administrators that is genuine and sustainable. In addition, the SPeNSE (2002) study reports that a positive school climate may serve to ameliorate some of a teacher’s job stress, promote job retention, and improve teacher quality.

Handpick Mentors
Researchers point to the first year of teaching as being pivotal to teachers’ futures in the field (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Mastropieri, 2001; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997) and recommend that new teachers be given mentors. Mentors are teachers who teach the same students, work in close proximity with the new teacher, and have similar teaching styles. Important mentor characteristics included trustworthiness and an ability to keep work confidential. Mentors, however, should not play a role in formal evaluation because that tends to discourage openness and collegiality.

When it is not possible to obtain a special education mentor within the school building, new teachers should be given both a special education mentor and a building-based mentor to initiate the new teacher into the school culture (Whitaker, 2000). Principals can play an important role in this process. In fact, the SPeNSE (2002) study reports that beginning special educators often found meeting with other new teachers and their special education colleagues to be more beneficial than formal inservices.

Emphasize Continued Learning
Gersten et al. (2001) note that “teachers who felt they were provided with opportunities to learn on the job tended to be less likely to leave” (p. 559). Such learning does not have to take the form of professional development workshops or formal mentoring; some authors recommend preparing teachers for the real world of teaching by providing them with time- and stress-management skills (Cesarone, 1999; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

SPeNSE (2002) argues for professional development that targets teachers’ areas of need. Special education teachers report three areas of relative skill weakness: teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, collaborating, and using technology in instruction. All three of these professional development skills are important if special education students are to be provided with the same opportunities as their general education peers.

SPeNSE (2002) also recommends that inservice topics be aligned with the Council for Exceptional Children’s Standards for Entry into Practice (see www.cec.sped.org/ps/ps-entry.html). Teachers whose inservice training covered these topics or who perceived their training as generally relevant to their daily work scored more highly on the SPeNSE teacher quality index.

Conclusion
Principals play an important role in special educators’ sense of efficacy and well-being, as well as in their decisions to leave or remain in the field. Prioritizing collaboration, being personally supportive, handpicking mentors, and emphasizing continued learning can help create the kind of environment in which special education teachers feel supported and valued. The success of our students and our schools depends on our efforts at collaboration and our
willingness to change. By making these small efforts on a daily basis, principals can provide an inclusive school climate that values and supports all individuals. PL

References


