

# **A Persistent Challenge: Staffing Special Education Programs in Rural Schools**

**Neil D. Theobald**  
*University of Washington*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Historically, rural school districts have experienced limited success in providing for the needs of students requiring specialized services. This study assesses the adequacy of the rural special education labor pool in Washington by applying a process suggested by Helge and Marrs (1982). Results suggest that rural school districts face a worsening shortage of special education personnel due primarily to an inability to attract qualified personnel to rural regions. Consistent with previous results reported by Bogenschield, Lauritzen, and Metzke (1988), no significant difference in attrition rates exists between rural and urban special educators. A statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) in attrition rates does exist, however, between special educators and general educators working in rural areas. The paper also reports the results of interviews with special education personnel in 29 school districts and one educational service district that sought to identify successful strategies being used in rural school districts to: (a) improve their ability to attract special education personnel, and (b) lower attrition rates among special educators.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rural schools have historically faced a persistent challenge in providing for the needs of those students requiring specialized services. In the U.S. today, the majority of unserved handicapped children continue to reside in rural areas (Reiff & Anderson, 1989). Studies that have examined this issue conclude that a shortage of qualified personnel is the most significant obstacle facing rural schools in serving handicapped children (Helge, 1987).

Reasons that have been cited for the difficulty that rural districts experience in recruiting and retaining qualified special educators include social, cultural, and geographical isolation (Casto, 1981; Helge, 1981, 1983; Helge & Marrs, 1982); lack of support services (Adelman, 1986; Casto, 1981); limited career mobility (Helge, 1983); and failure by colleges and universities to prepare future special educators for the realities of teaching and living in rural areas (Miller & Sidebottom, 1987; Reetz, 1988; Rydell, Gage, & Colnes, 1986; Smith & Burke, 1983). As a result, Miller and Sidebottom recently described the rural special education situation nationally as "near a crisis level" (p. 1).

Personnel issues have recently become the focus of a great deal of attention in states throughout the Western U.S. that are currently experiencing rapid increases in public school enrollments. The state of Washington, for example, has registered enrollment increases in excess of 2% annually over the last five years. This rapid enrollment growth masks an even more precipitous increase in the number of special education students in the state. While general education enrollments increased 8.1% between the 1984-85 and 1989-90 school years, special education enrollments surged 21.2% over this period (see Table 1).

This rapid school enrollment growth is not uniform across rural and urban counties<sup>1</sup> in the state. Between 1984-85 and 1988-89, enrollments in school districts in urban regions of the state grew at an annual rate of 1.8% while those in rural counties increased only 1.3% annually (see Table 2). This difference is explained by the differing growth rates in general education enrollments. Over this four-year period, special education enrollments actually increased faster in rural than in urban regions of the state.

The tremendous increase in rural special education enrollments has heightened concern regarding the adequacy of the state's rural special education labor

---

*Neil D. Theobald is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195.*

*Table 1*  
**Washington State General and Special Education FTE Enrollments, 1984-85 to 1989-90**

School Year	General Education FTE enrollment	Percent of Change	Special Education FTE enrollment	Percent of Change
1984-85	636,324		66,223	
1985-86	641,387	0.80	67,562	2.02
1986-87	651,315	1.55	69,421	2.75
1987-88	661,213	1.52	72,632	4.63
1988-89	672,262	1.67	76,156	4.85
1989-90	688,092	2.35	80,264	5.39

**Source:** Washington State Office of Financial Management (1988, p.4); State of Washington, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report 1735.

**Note:** The 1989-90 general education enrollment figure is based upon unpublished data.

pool in terms of both quantity and quality. In the past, states have typically responded to rural special education personnel shortages by lowering hiring standards and using underqualified personnel (Reiff & Anderson, 1989). This study is generated by concern that rapid special education enrollment increases in rural districts will only increase this problem and further exacerbate the chronic difficulty that rural school districts experience in recruiting and retaining qualified personnel in their communities.

## STUDY DESIGN

This study is built upon previous work by Helge and Marrs (1982) and Halpern (1982). The first paper

concluded that any viable system for recruiting and retaining educators in rural areas must: (a) use forecasts of short and long-term needs that are based on variables such as attrition rates, number of children expected in various grades and programs, and types of handicapping conditions prevailing; (b) communicate these needs to the appropriate agencies; and (c) help link resources (e.g., universities with graduating teachers) with needs (e.g., school districts experiencing shortages).

This study attempts to incorporate each of these three elements. Special educators in Washington may be certified in nine fields: (a) K-12 teacher, (b) elementary classroom teacher, (c) secondary classroom teacher, (d) administrative supervisor, (e) communication disorder specialist, (f) school psychologist, (g) so-

*Table 2*  
**Enrollment Changes in Rural and Urban Counties, 1984-85 to 1988-89**

	Annual percentage change in rural counties	Annual percentage change in urban counties
Total enrollment	1.3	1.8
General education	1.0	1.7
Special education	3.9	3.5

**Source:** State of Washington, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report 1041; State of Washington, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report 1735T.

cial worker, (h) occupational therapist, and (i) physical therapist. The study develops supply-and-demand forecasts for each of these nine occupations, and disaggregates this information for nine separate regions of the state: (a) Olympic Peninsula, (b) Northwest Washington, (c) North Puget Sound, (d) South Puget Sound, (e) Southwest Washington, (f) South Central Washington, (g) Central Washington, (h) Northeast Washington, and (i) Southeast Washington.

These projections were then mailed to the special education directors in all 296 school districts in the state, the education committees in the Washington State Legislature, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and all professional organizations in the state. Finally, each of the state's 16 public and private universities have been made aware of the employment record of their graduates<sup>2</sup> and, in order to provide leads on prospective special education personnel, school districts, at their request, have been provided with information detailing the source of training for all individuals granted special education certification in the state in the last five years, disaggregated by special education occupation.

Additionally, Halpern (1982) has issued a call for research that attempts to identify "any promising strategies being used in particular states or regions to make resources more readily available in critical areas" (p. 498). In order to gather such information, structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with special education directors in 29 school districts and one educational service district. Several of the rural school districts visited in the course of this study have implemented innovative strategies to meet the challenges of staffing special education programs. A second focus of this paper is to report on successful practices currently being used in these districts, and to offer recommendations of additional actions that could be undertaken.

While this study uses data from Washington, discussions with special educators in other states suggest that this is an issue of national importance. To the extent that the process and data developed in this study and the recommendations they have engendered are generalizable to other states, this work should prove helpful to others in developing a process for examining their own states' rural special education labor market.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

This study uses certified personnel data from all 296 school districts in the state for the four school years

between 1984-85 and 1987-88. The Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction maintains a census of certified and classified personnel employed by every school district in the state. This census file contains a unique identifier for every individual; thus, it is possible to follow the careers of school personnel as long as they are active in the public education system of Washington. For all persons working for school districts in the state, this database specifies the district in which they are employed, the type of activity (e.g., teacher, counselor, occupational therapist), and program (e.g., special education, vocational education) in which they are involved and, in the case of teachers, whether they are teaching at the primary or secondary level. In addition to this information on an individual's primary assignment, the database also specifies the highest degree attained, state and year in which degree was received, certificates held, and the institution granting each certificate.

In order to gauge future demand for special education personnel, this study employs a cohort survival method to project state-wide enrollment increases for each of the state's 14 special education handicapping conditions (preschool developmentally handicapped, seriously behavior disabled, orthopedically impaired, health impaired, specific learning disabled, mentally retarded-mild, mentally retarded-moderate, mentally retarded-severe, multi-handicapped, deaf, hearing impaired, visually handicapped, deaf-blind, and communication disorder). Special education cohort enrollment data are not disaggregated by school district within the state database; therefore, it is not possible to use a cohort survival method to project special education enrollments by region. Instead, the study forecasts regional enrollment changes by using the state-wide figure for each handicapping condition.

Such numerical data alone, however, form an insufficient basis for analyzing an entity as complex as a state's special education labor market. Therefore, on-site interviews were conducted in 14 representative rural school districts, one of the state's nine educational service districts, and 15 representative non-rural school districts<sup>3</sup> chosen on the basis of school district enrollment, student demographics, access to the state's 16 educator-training institutions, and district property wealth<sup>4</sup>. A 181-question survey was sent to all of the state's school districts (with a return rate of 77.7%)<sup>5</sup>, and a brief, five-item survey was sent to the colleges and universities that provide educational certification in this state (with a return rate of 68.8%, including all seven major institutions).

## Procedures

The in-district interviews were designed to gather information and opinions that were of importance to district personnel, but that were not addressed in the written survey or could not be effectively communicated by a written format. Data were acquired from 62 structured, open-ended interviews conducted by one interviewer. The special education director in each district was interviewed first, with the selection of additional informants based on recommendations from the special education director. The individuals interviewed, in addition to the special education director in each district (29), included personnel directors (9), teachers (9), superintendents (7), educational cooperative special education directors (4), principals (2), a school board member, and a curriculum director. The face-to-face interview sessions were informal in nature and guided by a series of 15 questions, one set for special education administrators and another set for other personnel. The interviews with special education directors were typically one hour in length, although the interest of the participants in the topic and the degree of concern about future trends in their district often extended this time (a phenomenon that is also reflected in the high return rate for the written survey). Interviews with other personnel members were usually completed in less than an hour.

The questions addressed to special education administrators attempted to gather data on: (a) their perception of the ability of the state's special education labor pool to meet their district's specific needs in each of nine special education occupations, (b) factors contributing to the recent increase in special education enrollments, (c) current barriers to staffing specific special education occupations in their district, (d) emerging trends in staffing special education positions, and (e) successful strategies for attracting and retaining special education personnel. The interviews with other personnel members were focused upon their perception of the desirability of working in the district's special education program and why individuals chose to enter or leave special education positions. Sample questions included: (a) "What are some of the things that people like about working in this district's special education program that make them want to continue working in these positions?"; (b) "Do you have an acquaintance who formerly worked in the district's special education program, but has since left? If so, where did they go and what were their reasons for leaving?"

Steps to reduce bias and error included efforts by the interviewer to convey and maintain a neutral position, verbal assurances of confidentiality and anonym-

ity, and the use of a structured but open-ended guide. Extensive field notes were taken in each of these sessions, and additional comments were taped by the interviewer after each district visit and were later transcribed. Responses were coded to identify emergent themes in rural and non-rural school districts for each category of the interview guide.

The written component of the school district survey was sent by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the special education directors in each of the state's 296 school districts and the nine educational service districts. The Likert-type survey instrument sought data, disaggregated for rural and non-rural school districts, on the extent to which: (a) districts contract with outside agencies in order to provide special education services, (b) districts experience difficulty in recruiting and retaining an adequate number of qualified personnel in each of nine special education occupations, (c) a number of variables play a role in recruiting and retaining an adequate number of qualified special educators, (d) districts use various methods (e.g., flyers to universities, internships, out-of-state recruiting trips) to recruit special education personnel for the district, and (f) districts provide various induction programs for new special education personnel.

The survey of state colleges and universities sought to measure each institution's current production of special educators and its capacity to meet additional demands. Specifically, the instrument asked each institution to: (a) provide the number of special educators, disaggregated by occupation, that had been recommended for initial certification in each of the past three years; (b) assess whether the institution's capacity to train special educators was being fully utilized, and if not, what the institution's maximum capacity given existing resources would be; and (c) evaluate whether the institution's capacity to train special education personnel could be expanded in the near term, by how much, and what resources would be required.

## RESULTS

Rural school districts and educational cooperatives face a worsening shortage of special education personnel due to: (a) special education enrollments which have increased by nearly 4% annually; (b) difficulty in attracting qualified personnel to rural regions; (c) attrition rates among special educators (12.5%), which are double the rate for personnel in general education programs (6.3%); and (d) declining enrollments in special education training programs. Consis-

tent with previous findings by Helge (1983a), both survey data and district interviews identify physical and occupational therapists and communication-disorder specialists as the occupations in which rural districts currently face the most critical shortage. Interview data from these districts suggest that a similar problem is developing with regard to school psychologists and teachers for severely handicapped, secondary behaviorally disabled, and preschool developmentally handicapped students.

Survey responses show that statistically significant differences<sup>6</sup> in staffing practices ( $p < 0.001$ ) exist between rural and non-rural districts. While more than 60% of non-rural districts fill all special education occupations (except physical therapist) with school district employees, more than 60% of rural school districts in the state contract with other school districts or educational service district cooperatives to staff communication disorder specialist (CDS) and school psychologist positions. More than 75% of rural districts also contract for occupational therapist (OT) and social worker services. Therefore, the pertinent comparison to be made in assessing relative success in providing an appropriate education for non-rural and rural children needing CDS, school psychologist, OT, and social worker services is between the quantity and quality of services available within non-rural districts and those that a rural district can purchase from other school districts or from educational service district cooperatives.

### **Special Education Enrollments**

As outlined in Table 1, the state's special education enrollments grew by 5.4% in the 1989-90 school year. The cohort survival method used in this study projects that special education enrollments state-wide will increase by an additional 14% in the next two years.

More than one-third of this increase is attributable to a projected 48% increase in the number of preschool developmentally handicapped students (from 7,960 in 1989-90 to 11,773 in 1991-92). Other handicapping conditions with projected two-year enrollment increases in excess of 20% include health impaired (44.0%), hearing impaired (33.0), and multi-handicapped (23.7%) (see Table 3).

Current state data do not allow these projections to be disaggregated into expected rural and non-rural increases. In the last four years for which data are available, however, rural special education enrollments have increased 10% faster than have non-rural special education enrollments (see Table 2). If this trend continues, rural special education enrollments can be expected to increase by nearly 16% in the next two years.

A major focus of the in-district interviews was the cause of skyrocketing rural special education enrollments. A large number of respondents pointed to the increasing number of dysfunctional families in rural areas and predicted that such schools will see a still larger number of students requiring special services in the future, with these youngsters requiring even more intensive help than is currently provided. Specific causes include an increase in substance abuse, latch-key children, transiency, poverty, emotional and physical abuse of children, and drug-dependent babies.

In addition to a greater number of special education students, rural and non-rural school districts are seen as being faced with increasing difficulty in obtaining parental cooperation due in many cases to escalating volatility within families. Several interviewees pointed to a rising number of parents who are ill-equipped to deal with the situation in which they find themselves, and who turn to the schools for assistance. Unfortunately, greater mobility among the population has made

*Table 3*  
**Projected Washington State Special Education FTE Enrollments, 1990-91 and 1991-92**

School year	Special education FTE enrollment	Percent of change
1989-90 (Actual)	80,264	5.39
1990-91	85,028	5.94
1991-92	91,444	7.55

**Source of 1989-90 enrollment data:** *State of Washington, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Report 1735.*

*Table 4*  
**Reported Degree of Difficulty In Obtaining an Adequate Number of Qualified Applicants,  
 Rural School Districts and Educational Service Districts**

Occupation	Degree of Difficulty
Physical Therapist	1.9
Occupational Therapist	2.0
School Psychologist	2.0
Communication disorder specialist	2.2
Secondary classroom teacher	2.8
Elementary classroom teacher	3.0
Social Worker	3.0
Administrator	3.4

**Scale:** 1.0 = Great Difficulty, 5.0 = No Difficulty  
**Number of Districts Responding:** 133

it more difficult for the schools to develop close, lasting working relationships with parents. By default, schools in general (and special educators in particular) are seen as assuming a wide range of responsibilities previously carried by the home.

### ***Attracting Special Educators to Rural Areas***

Rural school districts and educational service districts that have attempted to recruit new special education personnel in the last four years report moderate-to-high difficulty in obtaining an adequate number of qualified applicants. Survey results from rural school districts and educational service districts show that the most difficult positions to fill have been physical and occupational therapist and school psychologist (see Table 4).

Districts reporting difficulty in obtaining qualified applicants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed certain reasons may have played a role in this problem. Survey results from rural school districts and educational service districts show that the increasingly complex nature of special education positions and the location of the district in a rural area were seen as playing the greatest role (see Table 5). While non-rural school districts also perceive greater complexity as having a significant role, they are significantly less likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) to believe that their location is a major deterrent in obtaining staff members. An additional constraint suggested by interview data is that rural districts need individuals who are qualified in several

fields. It is common for special education teachers in these relatively small districts to fill several unrelated assignments. Even those working within the special education field only must be prepared to work with students in varying grade levels, and possibly with preschoolers as well.

The methods used to recruit needed personnel members differ between rural and non-rural districts. While the majority of non-rural districts report that they recruit at universities (51%), conferences (62%), and career fairs (69%), less than one-third of the rural districts report using any of these approaches in the last four years. Instead, the majority of rural districts in the state depend solely upon written job descriptions posted in the district and sent to professional associations and universities in the region.

### ***Special Education Attrition***

A major factor leading to strong demand for special education personnel is high attrition from the profession. Helge (1983) has reported that attrition rates of 30% to 50% are the norm for rural special educators. During the four-year period of this study, analysis of state personnel records shows that attrition among rural special educators was less than 15% in each year, and was not significantly higher than that experienced among special educators in the state's urban areas (see Table 6). This result is consistent with previous work by Bogenschild et. al. (1988), which found no statistically significant difference in over-all attrition rates between rural and urban teachers.

**Table 5**  
**Reported Importance of Various Reasons for Difficulty In Obtaining an Adequate Number of Qualified Applicants, Rural School Districts and Educational Service Districts**

Reason	Importance
Increasingly complex types of services special education personnel are being asked to provide	1.5
Location of district	1.5
Salary offered	2.1
Limited recruiting resources	2.2
Location of training institutions	2.4
Working conditions	2.5
Physical amenities or facilities in school district	2.9

**Scale: 1.0 = Significant Role, 5.0 = No Role**  
**Number of Districts Responding: 133**

A statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) does exist, however, between attrition rates calculated for special educators and general educators working in rural areas. Several special education directors in rural areas noted that high attrition rates in the special education staff have inhibited the development of stable connections among school staff members and between school staff members and parents. In addition, while a certain amount of turnover in the school staff was seen as inevitable, and indeed desirable, high rates of turnover within a program were seen by personnel directors as disruptive to special education program continuity and planning. Helge and Marrs (1982) have pointed out that constant turnover makes it virtually impossible to develop and implement long-range staff development plans. This discontinuity is not only detrimental to student learning, but several districts also commented

on the financial burden of added recruiting and hiring costs.

In interviews, the explanations given for why teachers leave a district differ between rural and non-rural districts. While explanations in non-rural areas centered almost entirely on the "burn-out" associated with special education positions, rural districts also identified the desire of young, single special educators to move to more metropolitan regions of the state; the excessive travel time required of special educators with assignments in several small, isolated school districts; and feelings of isolation with few opportunities to interact with peers at meetings and an accompanying loss of encouragement and support as central to their retention problem.

This dichotomy is also reflected in survey results for rural districts (see Table 7). The results parallel the

**Table 6**  
**Attrition from Special and General Education Positions in Rural and Urban Counties, 1984-85 to 1987-88**

	Special Education			General Education		
	Leaves	Total	Attrition	Leaves	Total	Attrition
Rural Counties	606	4,743	12.8%	2,408	37,686	6.4%
Urban Counties	1,279	10,316	12.4%	4,062	64,912	6.3%

reasons seen for difficulties experienced in attracting personnel to rural areas. A statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) exists between the importance given to school district location by rural districts (1.9) and the importance perceived by non-rural districts (3.1).

Hawk (1986-87) has emphasized the importance of support programs for new staff members in retaining their services in future years. Survey results show that while 55% of non-rural districts provide mentors for special educators new to the district, only 27% of the rural districts provide such assistance. McIntosh (1989) points out the cost effectiveness of such programs. They require little financial support and yet can ease a special educator's adjustment to a new school and community by providing both responses to questions about day-to-day activities, and emotional support through difficult times.

### **Enrollment in University Special Education Programs**

Survey data from the state's colleges and universities show a 26% decline in the number of special education classroom teachers, and a 29% decrease in the number of school psychologists recommended for certification between the 1985-86 and 1988-89 school years. In order to provide the personnel needed in their special education programs, several school districts report that they have made extensive efforts to recruit out-of-state candidates. Rural school districts, however, have not been as successful in this attempt as have other districts

in the state. Nearly 20% of the special educators hired during this period were trained out-of-state; survey results, however, show that while urban and suburban districts have been quite successful in recruiting special educators from California, Oregon, and Idaho, almost all special educators hired by rural school districts are trained in-state.

## **DISCUSSION**

The projected impact of the data outlined above is a matter of great concern in the districts visited during the course of this study. Nearly every district, without regard to size, wealth, or geographical location, has either already experienced a problem in employing an adequate number of well-qualified special educators or anticipates such a problem in the near future. Those districts that are not experiencing difficulties are located in metropolitan settings, have developed a state-wide reputation for their programs, work closely with universities, and recruit heavily.

Rural school districts are particularly vulnerable because of a combination of too few educators in the rural hiring pool and relatively high attrition among the state's special educators. Yet, several rural school districts visited during this study are achieving considerable success in meeting the increasingly severe challenge they face. The foci of these innovative approaches have been to: (a) improve the ability of their rural district to attract personnel, and (b) lower attrition rates among special educators.

*Table 7*  
**Reported Importance of Various Reasons for Difficulty in Retaining Qualified Special Education Personnel, Rural School Districts and Educational Service Districts**

Reason	Importance
Increasingly complex types of services special education personnel are being asked to provide	1.7
Location of district	1.9
Salary offered	2.1
Movement into a regular education position	2.2
Working conditions	2.4
Physical amenities or facilities in school district	2.0

**Scale: 1.0 = Significant Role, 5.0 = No Role**  
**Number of Districts Responding: 133**

In a modification of an approach reported by McIntosh (1986), a rural district visited during the course of the study has begun hiring regular education teachers already in the community and has then provided resources (i.e., release time) to help these individuals obtain special education certification. School districts in south central Washington report great success in providing programs which encourage classified staff members to become certified in the field of special education by providing tuition reimbursement and stipends for those already serving handicapped children. The largest program, which attempts to target bilingual and minority staff, is currently providing special education training to 18 classified staff members. Several rural districts visited in the study are also successfully using an approach suggested by Berry and Davis (1978) in which paraprofessionals are used to provide more efficient use of certified staff members' time. These classified staff members are used extensively in direct work with students under qualified supervision and have been trained to properly execute much of the paperwork that formerly burdened certified staff.

Kirmer, Lockwood, Mickler, and Sweeney (1984) have discussed the difficulties inherent in regional special education delivery systems. Two rural, remote school districts in northeastern Washington have found that the development of a "two-district co-op" has permitted them to provide more desirable working conditions for their special education staff, which has improved the districts' ability to attract qualified personnel to their region. This arrangement provides more effective scheduling of specialists' time and is less expensive than the districts' previous arrangement with a larger cooperative since they avoid the regional cooperative's surcharge. Difficulty has arisen, however, due to some conflicting language in the two school districts' collective bargaining agreements. To avoid such problems, these districts recommend that, if possible, support specialists should be removed from the bargaining unit.

Approaches geared toward lowering the attrition rates among special educators have focused upon avoiding the isolation that many special educators report experiencing in their positions. This problem has been addressed in one district by: (a) avoiding the placement of any special education classes in portables or in extremities of buildings; (b) delegating responsibility for the supervision and evaluation of special education teachers to building principals, with the special education director seen only as a resource; and (c) directing building administrators to set the tone that special education is part of the building program, not "a guest in the house."

Additional state-supported innovations are needed, however. Discussions with rural special educators and preservice students suggest that the low number of applicants for positions in rural school districts is a function not only of "a negative stereotype that makes working and living (in rural districts) seem unattractive" (Miller & Sidebottom, 1987, p. 3), but also of high recruiting costs that face both rural districts and potential candidates. Many rural school districts are geographically isolated from the colleges and universities that prepare potential applicants. In order to recruit personnel from these institutions, rural districts must either depend totally upon self-selection for applicants (which may prove costly in terms of the quality and quantity of applications from whom the district may select), or these districts must allocate the resources needed to support a recruiting effort. Applicants also face a relatively high cost in terms of time, and possibly travel expenses, if they are to acquire the information needed to make an informed decision about accepting a position in the district. The costs involved for both the district and the applicant are higher, on average, for rural school districts than for urban or suburban districts. States could "level the playing field," by providing financial incentives for students enrolled in special education programs in the state's colleges and universities to travel to rural school districts for on-site interviews.

In addition, Helge (1987) stresses the desirability of providing opportunities for prospective special educators to prepare in rural classrooms. Prospective rural special educators generally fall into three categories (Marrs, 1984): (a) Individuals who have grown up in rural communities and are interested in working in special education, (b) Individuals who are place-bound in rural areas and are forced into teaching special education by circumstances, and (c) Individuals who accept positions in rural areas knowing nothing about ruralness. Marrs argues that this third group of rural special educators "will have greater personal, as well as professional, success" (p. 341) if their university training specifically prepares them to work with the rural handicapped population.

To begin to meet this need, the University of Washington has developed a rural early-childhood, special education training program that was designed to assist prospective early-childhood special educators in understanding the challenges of providing specialized services in rural settings, using appropriate education strategies and technological aids, and using available resources for personal and professional growth (Mills, Vadasy, & Fewell, 1987). The program required

students to: (a) participate in weekly seminars that focused on issues of delivering services in rural areas, (b) learn to use appropriate technology, and (c) serve a four-week practicum in a rural setting to obtain first-hand, intensive field experience. The program has recently been discontinued due to lack of funding. Similar programs, which include a secure funding source, should be developed in other special education programs in other states.

In addition, Helge and Marrs (1982) contend that the first group of special educators — those who have grown up in rural communities — are most likely to remain in rural districts since they have goals, mores, expectations, and lifestyles similar to the families they serve. A promising vehicle for recruiting rural youngsters into special education professions, while helping to alleviate the current special education personnel shortage, would be state-sponsored future teacher clubs modeled after military ROTC programs. High school students would be provided opportunities to serve as salaried aides in special education classrooms. This recruiting effort could be further strengthened by implementing a system of loan forgiveness programs and/or university scholarships, including stipends for campus living expenses for students pursuing special education certification.

Casto focuses upon the need to improve the level of support services available to rural special educators. Relatively high levels of spending in rural school districts in Washington<sup>7</sup> make feasible the introduction of advanced technologies that Helge (1984b) argues can at least partially ameliorate the professional isolation experienced by rural special educators. Technologies such as two-way satellite communication could provide rural personnel with direct access to technical assistance throughout the country and, perhaps even more important, connection to their peers in other rural school districts.

## Conclusions

The general consensus among school district people interviewed in this study is that the shortage of qualified special education personnel members in rural areas will almost certainly increase before any improvement in the situation can be expected. In 1987, Washington tightened teacher certification regulations and, beginning in 1992, it will become one of the few states in the country requiring its teachers to earn a graduate degree in order to become eligible for standard certification. Special education directors interviewed in small

and rural districts are particularly concerned about this proposed change in certification regulations, which they feel could severely limit their ability to compete with rural school districts in neighboring states for special education teachers.

Special education directors interviewed for this study are pessimistic not only about the number of likely applicants for special education positions, but there is also great concern regarding the quality of candidates. Even those districts currently in relatively strong recruiting positions report that while they can choose from a fairly good supply of well-qualified staff members early in the hiring season, by the time the last person is hired, few (if any) properly qualified applicants are available.

In order to begin to recruit the large number of qualified special educators needed in rural districts, as well as to retain the services of the numerous talented individuals currently in these districts, creative and innovative methods for recruiting and retaining special education personnel members need to be developed and implemented. This paper reports successful practices currently used in rural districts to meet these challenges and offers recommendations of additional actions that could be undertaken.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Twenty-eight of Washington's 39 counties are considered to be rural in this study. These counties do not contain a region that has been identified as a metropolitan statistical area, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>2</sup>Each university was provided with the following data:

- \* The number of their graduates employed by Washington school districts in special education positions, disaggregated by occupation (e.g., the percentage employed as occupational therapists); by region (e.g., the percentage employed in the North Puget Sound region); by occupation by region (e.g., the percentage of their occupational therapist graduates who are employed in the North Puget Sound region); and by region by occupation (e.g., the percentage of

their graduates employed in the North Puget Sound region who are working as occupational therapists).

- \* The number of their new graduates employed by Washington school districts in special education positions, disaggregated along the same four dimensions.

<sup>3</sup>Non-rural school districts in this study are those districts that are located within 50 miles of one of the state's three primary metropolitan statistical areas, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>4</sup>Representative rural (non-rural) school districts were selected by the following process:

- \* Notation was made for each rural (non-rural) district as to its rank among rural (non-rural) districts in percentage of minority students, percentage of students who qualify for a free- or reduced-price lunch program, and assessed property value per pupil, and whether the school district was located within 50 miles of one of the state's 16 educational training institutions.
- \* All rural (non-rural) school districts were sorted by October 1, 1988 enrollment and divided into 15 equal-sized groups (1/15 of the rural [non-rural] districts, rounded to the nearest whole number, were in the first group; 2/15 of the rural [non-rural] districts, rounded to the nearest whole number, were in the first two groups, and so on).
- \* Within each group, the mean rank on the three variables and the percentage within 50 miles of a training institution were calculated.
- \* If the majority of school districts in a group were within (more than) 50 miles of a training institution, the minority within the group on this variable were discarded.
- \* The school district within each group with the smallest deviation between the sum of the district's rank on the three variables and the sum of the group's rank on the three variables was deemed to be the representative district in the group (if two districts equally

deviate from the mean, then the representative district was chosen at random from these two districts).

One of the rural school districts provided no special education services and therefore an interview was instead conducted in the educational service district that provided these services.

<sup>5</sup>This abnormally high response rate to such a lengthy questionnaire can be attributed to: (a) high levels of interest by participants in the topic, combined with profound concern about future trends in their own districts, and (b) diligent efforts by the staff in the Superintendent of Public Instruction's Division of Special Services and Support Programs and in the state's nine educational service districts to make follow-up telephone contact with appropriate personnel members in school districts that had not returned the surveys.

<sup>6</sup>Data for this study were analyzed using the SAS General Linear Model procedure (PROC GLM) to carry out unbalanced analyses of variance on rural and non-rural school districts.

<sup>7</sup>Net expenditure per pupil (excluding transportation) in the state's rural school districts has soared from 22% above the state's average expenditure in 1974-75 to 55% above the state average in 1988-89.

## REFERENCES

- Adelman, H. S. (1986). Staffing the field for the future. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 19, 477-479.
- Berry, B., & Davis, A. (1978). Community mental health ideology: A problematic model for rural areas. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 48, 673-679.
- Bogenschild, E. G., Lauritzen, P., & Metzke, L. (1988). *A study of teacher attrition*. Reston, VA: National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education.

- Casto, G. (1981). *Training, recruiting, and retaining personnel in rural areas: Making it work in rural communities*. Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University.
- Halpern, R. (1982). Special education in rural America. *The Educational Forum*, 46, 491-501.
- Hawk, P. P. (1986-87). Beginning teacher programs: Benefit for the experienced educator. *Action in Teacher Education*, 8(4), 57-63.
- Helge, D. I. (1981). Problems in implementing comprehensive special education programming in rural areas. *Exceptional Children*, 47, 514-520.
- Helge, D. I. (1983). *Images: Issues and trends in rural special education*. Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University.
- Helge, D. I. (1984a). The state of the art of rural special education. *Exceptional Children*, 50, 294-305.
- Helge, D. I. (1984b). Technologies as rural special education problem solvers. *Exceptional Children*, 50, 351-359.
- Helge, D. I. (1987). Strategies for improving rural special education program evaluation. *Remedial and Special Education*, 8(4), 53-60.
- Helge, D. I., & Marrs, L. W. (1982). Personnel recruitment and retention in rural America: A growing problem. *The Pointer*, 26(2), 28-33.
- Kirmer, K., Lockwood, L., Mickler, W., & Sweeney, P. (1984). Regional rural special education programs. *Exceptional Children*, 50, 306-311.
- Marrs, L. W. (1984). A bandwagon without music: Preparing rural special educators. *Exceptional Children*, 50, 334-342.
- McIntosh, D. K. (1986). Problems and solutions in delivery of special education services in rural areas. *The Rural Educator*, 8(1), 12-15.
- McIntosh, D. K. (1989). Retention of teachers in rural areas. *The Rural Educator*, 11(1), 26-29.
- Miller, J., & Sidebottom, D. (1987). *Teachers: Finding and keeping the best in small and rural districts*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Mills, P., Vadasy, P., & Fewell, R. (1987). Preparing early childhood special educators for rural settings: An urban university approach. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 7(3), 59-74.
- Reetz, L. (1988). Conflict and stress among rural special educators. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 8(3), 22-26.
- Reiff, H. B., & Anderson, P. L. (1989). Training needs of rural special educators in Louisiana. *Research in Rural Education*, 6(1), 45-50.
- Rydell, L., Gage, B., & Colnes, A. (1986). Teacher recruitment and retention in Maine: An overview. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 7(2), 22-23.
- Smith, J., & Burke, P. J. (1983). *A national survey of manpower supply and demand in special education*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland Institute for the Study of Handicapped Children and Youth.
- Washington State Office of Financial Management. (1988). *Public common school enrollment forecasts: Washington State 1989-91 biennial budget*. Olympia: Author.