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**Staffing High-Need Middle Schools:
North Carolina Teachers' Perspectives**

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Staffing High-Need Middle Schools: North Carolina Teachers' Perspectives

The intent of this study was to investigate how to attract and retain middle school teachers working in high-need schools in North Carolina. The researchers investigated the following guiding questions: (a) What characteristics make teachers successful and what strategies can improve student achievement in high-need middle schools? (b) What strategies can be implemented to attract and retain teachers in high-need middle schools? (c) Why do middle school teachers choose to stay in or leave high-need schools? (d) What characteristics make administrators successful leaders in high-need

middle schools? and (e) In what ways can teacher education programs begin preparing preservice teacher candidates to work in high-need middle schools?

The data for this study were obtained from middle school teachers (n=149) who taught in a high-need middle school during the 2007 school year. An online survey was utilized to obtain teachers' perspectives about issues facing high-need middle schools. For the purpose of this research, high-need is defined as schools where the percentage of economically disadvantaged students is greater than 80% of the student population (North Carolina School Report Cards [NCSRC], 2007). Economically disadvantaged students are children from families whose income is at or below the levels shown eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch, School Breakfast Programs, and/or After School Snack (NCSRC).

Related Literature

Creating Successful High-Need Schools

The reality is distressing. Minority children and poor children have more unqualified and ineffective teachers who tend to leave the teaching profession within the first five years (Berry, 2004; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000). If students are not obtaining a reasonable instructional experience at high-need schools and if teachers are leaving high-need schools, then what is happening at successful high-need schools? According to The Center for Public Education (2005), characteristics of successful high poverty schools include having high expectations for children, engaging in ongoing assessment and individualized instruction, aligning the curriculum with instruction and assessment, promoting a collaborative model with teachers involved in decision making, planning across grade levels and curriculum areas, filling classrooms with highly qualified teachers, and encouraging family involvement.

One example of a successful high-need middle school is The Johns Hopkins Talent Development Middle School (TDMS). The Johns Hopkins Talent Development Middle School (TDMS) model is being implemented in five high poverty middle schools in Philadelphia. This model has two purposes: (a) to develop a whole-school reform model for urban middle schools that will equip teachers to provide every student a standards-based education and (b) to create the knowledge base, materials, and infrastructure needed for middle schools so that all students benefit. This model contains five critical components that include having schools organized in a common way, providing intensive and ongoing support for teachers, offering a variety of learning supports to students, reflecting frequently on research, refinement, and evaluation, and showing a strong commitment to this model (Balanz & Mac Iver, 2000).

Retaining and Attracting High-Need Teachers

Useem (2001) reported about a study that looked at teacher recruitment, preparation and retention. Teachers in the study were asked if they would leave the district within the next five years if they received an acceptable offer elsewhere and 66% of them said

yes they would depart. Reasons they gave for leaving included problems with student behavior and discipline, low salary, lack of materials and supplies, and lack of administrative support. Berry (2004) stated that “keeping teachers is a far larger problem than preparing new ones and may be the fundamental solution to the teacher shortage problem” (p. 6).

Gehrke's (2005) research revealed that successful teachers in high-need schools were aware of their personal beliefs, understood the differences in students' backgrounds, and understood the living conditions of most of their students. These teachers utilized instructional strategies that related to the students' lives. They also held high expectations for the students and believed poverty was not an excuse for low expectations.

Berry (2004) states that some strategies are used to attract and retain teachers to schools; however, “these strategies help place more teachers in the pipeline for the future, but they do not ensure that those teachers take jobs in schools where they are needed most” (p. 3). In other words, retention and attraction strategies need to be targeted to high-need schools in order to fill those classrooms with strong and effective teachers.

Leading in High-Need Schools

King and Servais (2009) stated that redirecting high-need schools is the responsibility of school leaders. They suggested that competent and caring leaders are needed to change high-need schools. “It is no coincidence that the heart is the strongest muscle of the body. The role of the heart cannot be overemphasized in leaders whose attitudes and beliefs will model for others the actions needed truly to transform poor schools” (King & Servais, para. 18). They stated that leadership in high-need schools is a balance of intellect, relational skills and action.

Principals and school leaders play an important role in improving school conditions and retaining teachers (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Petty, O'Connor, & Dagenhart, 2009; Watkins, 2005). According to Ingersoll (2004) and Darling-Hammond (1997), job dissatisfaction, working conditions and inadequate support from school leaders are primary reasons why teachers leave the classroom. One study found that to work in high poverty schools, effective teachers wanted principals to be risk-takers and teacher advocates in order to empower teachers (Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004). As Watkins stated, “Retaining and developing quality teachers must become a principal's priority” (p. 83).

Preparing Teachers in High-Need Schools

Bennett (2008) found that secondary preservice teachers had little understanding about poverty or the lives of students who were living in poverty. In order to help future teachers understand students from poorer areas, she created a sociocultural driving tour of the community to assist students in seeing poverty. Bennett claimed that

studying poverty resulted in three developments for preservice teachers: (a) an awareness of socioeconomic differences; (b) an empathetic rapport and caring attitudes; and (c) a commitment to culturally responsive teaching.

Teacher preparation programs need to play a more vital role in the area of preparing teachers to work in high-need schools. For example, teacher preparation programs must ensure a variety of clinical placements (practicum experiences), including a mandatory course or practicum placement in high-need schools before graduation (Petty et al., 2009). Other solutions in the literature included “growing our own” and “home grown” teacher programs (Berry, 2004) for high-need school vacancies and using teacher residency programs (Berry et al., 2008). When teachers have been raised in the local area that they are employed in or when teachers are in a “residency,” they have more knowledge about the children and community and can get a better start in a high-need school.

Methods

When the study began there were 106 high-need middle schools in North Carolina. Using a random number generator, researchers invited one-third of the schools to participate. Twenty-four of the 35 schools agreed to contribute. After receiving permission from the school principal or technology coordinator for the county, the online survey was sent to 328 middle school teachers. One hundred fifty-eight surveys were completed and returned, yielding a 48.2% return rate.

The first part of the survey included a demographics section. Part two of the survey asked participants to respond to eight multiple choice questions about administrator/teacher characteristics, retention/attraction strategies, and working conditions. Participants were asked to choose from a list of items. Given the nature of these questions data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies.

Of the 158 participants, 66.5% (n=105) reported teaching in a rural setting while 31.6% (n=50) reported teaching in an urban setting. Three participants did not indicate their school setting. The participants of this study held a variety of positions in their schools with 74.7% (n=118) being classroom teachers, 1.9% (n=3) being administrators, 1.3% (n=2) being literacy/reading teachers, and 19.6% (n=31) indicating they were serving in other teaching positions in the school. Four participants did not indicate their position.

The participants of this study were asked to specify their number of years of teaching experience, the highest degree they had earned, their path to teacher licensure and whether or not they were National Board Certified teachers. Participants were asked to select one of the following regarding years of teaching experience: 0 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years, 16 to 20 years, 21 to 25 years, and 26+ years. The following results were reported: 36.7% (n=58) had 0 to 5 years of teaching experience, 17.7% (n=28) had 6 to 10 years of teaching experience, 13.9% (n=22) had 11 to 15 years of teaching experience, 6.3% (n=10) had 16 to 20 years of teaching experience, 4.4% (n=7) had 21 to 25 years of teaching experience, and 17.7% (n=28) had more than 25

years of teaching experience. Five participants did not indicate their years of experience. Participants also indicated the highest degree earned with 67.1% (n=106) having a Bachelor's degree, 29.1% (n=46) a Masters degree and 1.3% (n=2) a Doctorate degree. Four participants did not respond to this question. Only 5.1% of the participants reported having National Board Certification. Finally, participants reported their path to teacher licensure with 59.5% (n=94) being traditional education graduates, 26.6% (n=42) being lateral entry graduates and 9.5% (n=15) still pursuing licensure. Seven participants did not specify their paths.

Findings

Creating Successful High-Need Teachers

The participants in this study were asked questions about teachers in high-need schools. They were first asked to choose three characteristics of successful teachers in high-need schools. The most frequently chosen characteristics were (a) having strong classroom management skills, (b) dedication, and (c) the ability to use multiple assessment strategies. See Table 1 for the complete list of characteristics and their respective frequencies.

Table 1

Characteristics of Successful Teachers in High-Need Schools

Characteristics of Successful Teachers	Frequency
Having strong classroom management skills	109
Dedication	83
Ability to use multiple assessment strategies	70
Flexible	40
Caring	39
Being accepting of students' backgrounds	38
Patient	33
Ability to use multiple instructional strategies	27
Strong knowledge of subject matter	9

Participants were also asked to identify strategies that teachers in high-need schools could use to improve student achievement. The most frequently reported strategies were: (a) differentiate for a variety of learning styles and (b) provide hands-on learning experiences. Other strategies are listed in Table 2 with corresponding frequencies.

Table 2

Strategies for Improving Student Achievement in High-Need Schools

Strategies for Improving Student Achievement	Frequency
Differentiate for a variety of learning styles	77
Provide hands-on learning experiences	75
Plan creative, high interest lessons	58
Maintain high expectations for all students	56
Create a positive classroom climate	55
Utilize lessons with high time on task	38
Involve parents	37
Offer after school tutoring/remediation	23
Use research-based motivational strategies	10
Implement research-based instruction	8

Attracting Successful High-Need Teachers

Attracting teachers to teach in high-need middle schools can be a difficult task. The participants of this study were asked to identify ways that teachers could be attracted to teach in high-need schools. The most frequently chosen ways to attract teachers were: (a) increased salaries, (b) smaller classes and (c) signing or annual bonuses. Table 3 provides a complete list of characteristics and frequencies.

Table 3

Ways to Attract Teachers to High-Need Schools

Attraction Strategies	Frequency
Increased salaries	115
Smaller classes	86
Signing or annual bonuses	79
Qualified/supportive principals	39
Energetic school culture of success	34
Adequate resources and supplies	24
Highly qualified mentor support	20
Teacher assistants	16
Pay off student loans	7

Retaining Successful High-Need Teachers

The findings from this study indicate that 71% (n=110) of the participants have only been working in their current high-need school for less than 5 years while 8% (n=13) have been in their current high-need school for more than 15 years. Participants were

asked to choose from a list of strategies that principals could employ to retain teachers. The responses chosen most often were: (a) provide support with discipline, (b) increase salaries/bonus money and (c) show respect for teachers' decisions. Table 4 presents a complete list of characteristics and frequencies.

Table 4

Ways to Retain Teachers in High-Need Schools

Retention Strategies	Frequency
Provide support with discipline	101
Increased salaries/bonus money	87
Show respect for teachers' decisions	60
Provide adequate materials and supplies	42
Offer frequent communication/feedback/support	39
Reduce extra duties	36
Allow for flexible scheduling	27
Provide desired professional development	23
Reduce classroom interruptions	15
Secure highly qualified mentors as needed	14

The participants in this study were also asked why they would remain in or leave their current school within the next five years. The most frequently reported reasons for staying were: (a) I love what I do; (b) I feel that I can make a difference, and (c) I have a supportive principal/administration. The most frequently stated reasons for leaving were: (a) The demands of my job are increasing, (b) I am retiring, and (c) The pay is too low. Table 5 displays a complete list of reasons for staying or leaving and the frequencies.

Table 5

Reasons Teachers Leave or Stay in High-Need Schools

Reasons for staying	Frequency	Reasons for leaving	Frequency
I love what I do.	45	The demands of my job are increasing.	18
I feel that I can make a difference.	42	I am retiring.	18
I have a supportive principal/administration.	36	The pay is too low.	16
I love the students.	20	I am relocating.	13
I enjoy working with my colleagues.	17	I do not receive adequate support from administration.	11
I enjoy my school and community.	14	I am changing careers.	10
I have invested a lot of time	6	I am not appreciated.	9

and energy at this school.			
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Creating Successful High-Need Administrators

Similar to the teachers, participants were also asked to choose three characteristics of successful administrators in high-need schools. The most frequently chosen characteristics were: (a) supportive of teachers, (b) ability to communicate and (c) organized. Table 6 offers the complete list of characteristics and frequencies.

Table 6

Characteristics of Successful Administrators in High-Need Schools

Characteristic	Frequency
Supportive of teachers	139
Ability to communicate	71
Organized	61
Knowledgeable about the curriculum and current research	47
Visible	47
Open-minded	41
Knowledgeable about policies	22
Good listener	21
Sensitive	7

Preparing Successful High-Need Teachers

How can teacher preparation programs better prepare beginning teachers to teach in high-need schools? Participants were asked to choose from a list of options to address this question. The most frequently chosen responses were: (a) offer coursework related to classroom management and (b) require practicum experiences in high-need schools. See Table 7 for the complete list of characteristics and frequencies.

Table 7:

Ways Teacher Preparation Programs can Train Teachers to teach in High-Need Schools

Strategies for Preparing Beginning Teachers	Frequency
Offer coursework related to classroom management	126
Require practicum experiences in high-need schools	85
Offer mentoring programs to recent graduates	70
Offer coursework related to building relationships with parents, guardians and families	70
Offer coursework related to poverty	55
Offer coursework related to ELL learners	20

Have guest speakers visit from high-need communities	14
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Implications

An interesting data point of this research study is the number of years of teaching experience for the participants in the study. Approximately 75% of the respondents (n=110) who participated in the survey had 0-5 years of teaching experience. This result is congruent with other research studies (Berry, 2004; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000) that indicate new, inexperienced teachers are teaching at high-need schools in the beginning of their careers. To address this concern, school systems and school leaders need to be prepared to fund mentoring and support programs to help these teachers with little teaching experience in high-need schools.

In this study of high-need middle schools and a previous study on high-need elementary schools (Petty et al., 2009), participants cited effective administrators as being those who are supportive of teachers. Even though money attracts teachers to teach in these high-need schools, effective administrators play a vital role in keeping them in these settings. School systems should consider hiring administrators for high-need schools who have experience working successfully in other high-need schools. If this is not feasible, school systems could offer an administrator mentoring program for high-need schools. This program could partner a new high-need school administrator with an administrator who has been successful leading in a high-need setting. This partnership could be formed within the school system or among school systems. Creating a program such as this would not only offer support to the administrator, it would help the administrator learn strategies to assist in the retention of teachers.

Although the data in two other studies (Petty et al., 2009; Petty, Fitchett, & O'Connor, 2011), one at the elementary level and one at the high school level, indicate the most frequently mentioned characteristics of successful high-need teachers are dedication and caring, in this particular study with a middle school sample, classroom management was the most frequently mentioned characteristic needed for successful high-need middle grades teachers. It appears that classroom management remains a critical issue to current middle grades teachers.

Middle grades respondents view classroom management as an important piece to the learning process. In other words, learning cannot effectively take place until a teacher has support in regards to classroom management. A teacher can plan a strong lesson, but he/she must have the skills to manage a group of students' behaviors and must be able to manage time and pacing for effective execution of the lesson. Some middle grades teachers use a team approach at their schools, meaning several teachers are assigned to a group of students throughout a year. This type of team approach increases conversation and communication among teachers about students' academic progress and behavioral issues. It is easier to track a student's behavior or put a student on a behavioral contract in a middle grades school when the student's team of teachers is meeting weekly about curriculum, assessment and affective issues. Having structure and consistency is important for students, even at the middle grades level. Typically,

negative behaviors are rooted in a problem not related to the teacher. Therefore, tracking academic and behavioral successes and needs could benefit the entire team of teachers and most importantly, the student.

This study also reveals that middle grades respondents stated most frequently that teacher education programs need more effective coursework in classroom management. Preservice teachers need opportunities to watch and observe quality teachers manage classrooms in high-need settings. Teacher education programs and school districts need to work together to identify and choose the most effective middle grades teacher models for clinical placements.

Additionally, it is important that teachers have a support system in the school. One way to ensure an immediate support system is to hire teachers in cohorts. In other words, hire 2-4 teachers who currently work together and already have a successful partnership at another school. If teachers knew that they could bring their entire team with them to a high-need school, then they may be more willing to go. This is similar to how college football coaches move teams and bring a known entity with them, their entire football staff.

Conclusion

The middle grades school is a unique system, and San Antonio (2006) suggests that educators should consider how middle grades schools balance their focus in reference to social and academic development. This research study asked teachers who teach in high-need middle grades schools about their perspectives on the retention and attraction of colleagues in the middle grades school setting. We must listen to the voices of middle grades teachers in the field, and “the field” in this case, is a disadvantaged setting with many distinctive needs. It is our responsibility to ensure all middle grades students have access to an overall quality education, including an effective teacher and administrator and supportive school environment. The importance of an effective teacher and administrator cannot be underestimated. School leaders play a critical role in strengthening school conditions and retaining teachers (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Watkins, 2005). With a positive attitude and good organizational skills, a school leader including a teacher or an administrator, can influence the school’s morale and reset high expectations for success.

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