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Below the Surface of SEA Turnover

**BELOW THE SURFACE OF
SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR TURNOVER**

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A Dissertation Presented to The Graduate School at the University of
Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

December 2016

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Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to thank for their support of this work. I would like to thank Dr. Kathleen Sullivan Brown for guiding me through the culmination of this process. You helped me get to the end! I would also like to thank Dr. Carole H. Murphy for making sure I knew how important this research was, even in the beginning when there was no literature to review. You continually talked about all the possibilities for where it could go. Thank you for your constant encouragement. I would like to thank Dr. Jean B. Crockett for being an impetus for this work. The work you have done on behalf of special educators is inspirational. I would also like to thank Dr. James V. Shuls for asking hard questions and providing valuable feedback that helped shape this research.

Secondly, I would like to thank my colleagues. For the teachers on my teams, I learned so much from you every day. I am grateful for the wonderful programs we were able to develop together. For my partner district administrators, thank you for being kid-centered and always willing to take a risk. To those special education administrators who participated in this study, I would like to especially thank you for your willingness to share, and more importantly, the candor with which you trusted me.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. To my father, for telling me I could do whatever I set my mind to. To Adrienne, you are the reason I started down the path to special education. To my mother-in-law for your immeasurable support...always and in all ways. To Casey and Cooper, for

being the best writing companions a writer could have. Finally, to my husband, without you everything else is meaningless. Thank you for encouraging me to keep going when I had no desire to finish. This is finally done because of you! We sacrificed so much time together, so that I could work on this research. This is yours just as much as it is mine.

Abstract

The field of special education administration has experienced a shortage of high quality special education leadership candidates for several decades. If school districts are to effectively address the turnover of educational leaders, they must know what is happening that affects turnover of their leadership team. The intent of this study was to determine what dynamics and perceptions contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job or leaving the position. The literature indicates a need for studies to address why these administrators remain in their roles. The literature also indicates a need for identifying what influences their decisions to remain or leave the role of special education administrator. The voices empowered within this work help us to see what is below the surface of special education administrator turnover. This research sought to determine perceptions and dynamics that motivate special education administrators to remain in their positions. Based on the results from the inquiry, this researcher concludes there are four interwoven themes that contribute to turnover of the special education administrator. The themes revealed include money, lack of support, stress and politics. These data are consistent with the previous literature. However, other studies did not include commentaries from those who held special education leadership roles. Data for this qualitative inquiry were gathered through an online survey and interviews with both current and former special education administrators. This study went below the surface of

special education administrator turnover with its participants to determine what dynamics and perceptions impact decision making when considering to stay or leave their leadership position.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

"Increasing the supply of special educators and decreasing attrition rates in the field of special education will continue to be important strategies...but the authors...challenge us to conceptualize special education personnel issues not only in terms of the quantity of special educators but also in terms of the qualities they will need to possess."

-John Provost, p. 106

Educational institutions around the world are facing a substantial shortage of quality administrative candidates for their vacant positions. In the Midwestern United States, the administrative crisis has been growing for some 30 years. Many administrators are either eligible to retire or will reach eligibility within a few years (Walters, 1983; NCPSE, 2003; Sjostrom, 2009). This is a multi-faceted problem that affects urban, rural and suburban school districts of all socioeconomic ranges and school districts of all sizes. It affects all positions within the administrative ranks. The latest evidence is that the administrator shortage is finding its way to the higher education realm (Smith, Robb, West, Tyler, 2010; Therrien, 2008; Washburn-Moses, Voltz, Collins, 2010; West, Hardman, 2012). There is vast evidence identifying the shortage of special education teachers consistently for decades (Billingsley, 2005; Billingsley, Crockett, Kamman, 2014; Brownell, Hirsch, 2004; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010; Gonzalez, Brown, 2008; NCPSE, 1998; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The body of literature extends to school principals and assistant principals (Goor, Boyer, Schwenn, 2007; Litchka, 2007; Normore, 2006; Pounder, Crow, 2005; Sergiovanni, Starratt, 2002; Sjostrom, 2009; Zellner, Ward, McNamara,

Camacho, Doughty, 2002) supporting what school districts around the country are encountering in the midst of shortages of these key roles in schools. "Although the shortage of administrators in general has been widely reported, there has been less attention to the shortage of special education administrators" (Lashley et al., p. 5). The literature surrounding the shortage of special education administrators is relatively unreported.

School districts are not only impacted by the "baby boomer" generation retirements, but there is mounting literature supporting the difficulty of the school and district leadership roles and administrators' willingness to accept or to remain in stressful administrative positions (Bakken, O'Brian, Sheldon, 2006; Litchka, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Wheeler, LaRocco, 2009). There are many reasons why administrative positions are not as appealing as they once were. Women in educational leadership have been marginalized for decades and this may limit their career aspirations to take on an executive leadership position. Most often, men hold the primary leadership roles within school districts. Furthermore, many special education administrators believe that being a special education administrator may limit their future opportunities for executive leadership positions (Keefe, Parmley, 2003; Stephens, Fish, 2010; Thompson, O'Brian, 2007). Additionally, many who possess administrative certification are not interested in taking on the increased responsibility of a formal administrative role as the salary for school administrators does not appear

to equate with the current responsibilities (McFadden, Salazar, Buckner, 2006; NASSP, 2008; Petzko, Searcy, 2001; Sjostrom, 2009).

Although not replete, these compounding factors contribute to the significant shortage of educational leaders across the country. Most school districts are prepared for shortages of teachers and have identified strategies to attract the most highly qualified candidates. However, most are not prepared to encounter a shortage of their district leadership, and they do not have strategic plans in place to maintain their current human capital. Odden contends this is one of the most significant problems that school districts will encounter. "Despite a large literature on leadership in education, there are fewer examples of strategic human capital management innovations aimed at school leaders, compared to teachers" (Odden, p. 27). Most school district efforts focus on attracting and retaining teachers.

Odden's argument that school districts need to be strategic about their human capital is of vital importance in the arena of special education administration. As the numbers of children requiring special education and related services continue to increase, and the laws, regulations, and programming surrounding special education become increasingly intricate, these administrators are necessary to lead school teams as they carefully navigate the provisions of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Bakken et al., 2006; Billingsley, 2007; Boscardin, 2007; Goor et al., 1997; Keenoy, 2012; IDEiA, 2004; Sjostrom, 2009; Troups, 2006;

Wagner, Katsiyannis, 2010; White, 2005). The purpose of IDEiA aims to increase the quality of special education programming that students received focusing on research-based interventions and student outcomes (IDEiA, 2004). "The changing role of the special education administrator is moving beyond special education disability expertise, compliance and implementation, and knowledge of laws and regulations to school reform and assuring all students succeed" (Sjostrom, p. 9). These increased performance expectations added to the accountability of No Child Left Behind, rigorous Common Core State Standards, knowledge of best instructional practices and the need for a highly qualified individual is effortlessly warranted (DESE; NCLB, 2001; Keenoy, 2012; Sjostrom, 2009).

Highly effective school leaders are critical when facing 21st century challenges. School leaders must grapple with "ensuring that the physical and attitudinal environment of the school" is appropriate so that all students can learn (Frick, p. 24). Schools are faced with the demand that all children will excel in school regardless of learning difference or ability (NCLB, 2001). Billingsley's team states, "In today's accountability context, improving the quality of both teachers and leaders is viewed as a primary approach to student outcomes. The importance of finding and keeping teachers and leaders who can implement research-based practices is widely acknowledged" (p. 107).

In addition to the increased demands and accountability, there is a solid body of research indicating principals have a difficult time dealing

with the increasing complexities of special education issues and are often ill-equipped to take on this portion of their leadership (Boscardin, 2007; Frick, Faircloth, Little, 2012; Keenoy, 2012; Rammer, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Wagner et al., 2010). Keenoy's research (2012) on principals' preparation and supporting special education issues indicates that there is a significant expectation, and little course work or focus at the graduate level on special education issues. Administrators in Missouri indicated they took slightly more than one course in special education during their administration coursework. Principals who did not have special education teaching backgrounds clearly reported not feeling prepared to lead special education programs. However, administrators with special education teaching background reported feeling very well prepared to handle special education issues in their buildings (Keenoy, 2012).

Lashley and Boscardin predicted that promoting education for all students would be a key talking point for special education administrators. "Special education and general education leaders will be challenged to join together to solve the problems of practice inherent in a diverse, complex, high-stakes educational environment" (Lashley et al., p.18). Lashley et al. (2003) argue that "...an effective special education leader for the 21st century requires that administrators work collaboratively...to bring resources, personnel, programs and expertise together to solve problems of practice for all students" (Lashley et al., p. 4). Special education administrators can be a resource for the leadership team

whenever a student is struggling. “Special education administrators have experienced increased pressure to transform programs, schools, and districts into learning organizations that continually assess their own progress and make adjustments” (Sjostrom, p. 1).

Sjostrom argues that special education leadership “can make or break a district” (Sjostrom, p. 1). Thus, it is imperative for school districts to retain only the best special education administrators. Within the last fifteen years, researchers have identified special education administration as an essential component of shared or collaborative leadership (Bakken et al., 2006; Bays, Crockett, 2007; Boscardin, 2007; Crockett, 2002; Honeyman, 2002; Spillane, 2003; Szwed, 2007). Indeed, special education administrators are now essential to the fabric of school leadership (Bakken et al., 2006; Billingsley, 2007; Boscardin, 2007; Keenoy, 2012; IDEiA, 2004; Sjostrom, 2009; Toups, 2006; Wagner et al., 2010; White, 2005). However, a considerable problem is surfaced by Boscardin (2007) and colleagues in that “the federal statute and the regulations of IDEA 2004 no longer reference directors of special education, and there is no specific reference as to what constitutes a highly qualified director of special education” (p. 69).

The title of the special education administrator has been cause for much confusion in the field of education. This may be a contributing factor to the limited investigations in special education leadership as it adds another layer of ambiguity when conducting research. The titles of

special education administrators vary depending on the level of management, the employing organization, or job description. Even from state to state, there are variations with the title as well as with licensure or certification requirements (Boscardin, 2007, 2010; Hebert, 1985; Lashley et al., 2003; Sjostrom, 2009; Thompson et al., 2007; Toups, 2006; Whitworth, Hatley, 1979). In some states, special education administration endorsements or certification requirements are disappearing altogether as colleges and universities strive to incorporate special education leadership skills within the context of general educational leadership programs (Boscardin, Weir, Kusek, 2010; COPSSE, 2004; Crockett, 2002; Smith et al., 2010; Voltz et al., 2010).

Some of the titles identified in the literature include special education coordinators, process coordinators, special education supervisors, special education principals, special education directors and assistant directors, directors of student services or special services, and assistant superintendents among various others. It is evident that there are many titles for the position of special education administrator in the United States. This adds to the perplexity of job descriptions, roles and responsibilities (Boscardin, Mainzer, Kealy 2011; Hebert, 1985; Sjostrom, 2009; Thompson et al., 2007; Toups, 2006; Voltz et al., 2010). Historically, the special education administrator primarily provided technical assistance and did not possess a leadership role within the school or district (Conner, 1961; Finkenbinder, 1981; Hebert, 1985; Whitworth et al., 1979).

However, roles and responsibilities have evolved despite lacking continuity in the field. The position has expanded to become a leadership position, which directly impacts a spectrum of programming from early intervention for at-risk students to students who already receive special education services (Boscardin et al., 2011; NCPSE, 1998; Thompson et al., 2007; Toups, 2006; Voltz et al., 2010). This role has evolved as changes in legislation have improved the access and quality of education students with disabilities receives (Sjostrom, 2009). Lashley and Boscardin define special education administrators as “individuals who work in school districts to lead, supervise, and manage the provision of special education and related services for students with disabilities” (Lashley et al., p. 4). They are responsible for implementing the mandates of the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEiA) as well as state and local statutes for the provision of special education and services. The intensity of, and potential for, litigation surrounding the implementation of federal and state statutes further compounds the impact of the special education leadership personnel shortage.

The shortage of special education administrators is not a new phenomenon. Conner predicted a need for specific recruitment strategies in 1961 (Conner, 1961). Funding from the federal government soon followed to increase the pipeline of special educators; this began as early as 1975 and has continued ever since (Kleinhammer-Tramill, Brace, 2010). However, no further research was conducted to identify needed

recruitment or retention strategies. Fifty years later, research is emerging (Lashley et al., 2003; Provost, 2009; Sjoström, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education, there were indications of a serious special education administrator shortage in the United States as early as 1980s and 1990s (Billingsley et al., 2014; Lashley et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2010).

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education (COPSSE) maintains that the shortage is twofold: attrition of special educators and inadequate supply of those entering preparation programs. Shortages of highly qualified special education administrators continued into the 1990s. There were growing numbers of special education administrators who were not certified and numbers of projected retirements indicated large numbers of vacancies due to a lack of qualified candidates (Billingsley et al., 2014). In 2003, Lashley et al. analyzed annual reports from the United States Department of Education, which demonstrated national shortage trends of special education administrators over multiple years. Because of uncoordinated certification requirements across the country, it was difficult for the team to ascertain what qualified a special education administrator as meeting certification requirements. Between the 17th Annual Report and the 22nd Annual Report, there was a 7.4% increase in vacant special education administrator positions (Lashley et al., 2003). They also hypothesized that the vacant positions may have been under reported.

Other research indicates many employed special education administrators had little formal training and primarily received on-the-job

training to gain knowledge or skills (Crockett, 2007; COPSSE, 2004; Keenoy, 2012; Lashley et al., 2003; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith et al., 2010; Stephens et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2007; Voltz et al., 2010; Washburn-Moses et al., 2008). Despite the economic crisis across the United States, where many people are underemployed or are being laid off, special education as a profession continues to experience shortages of highly qualified candidates across the ranks (COPSSE, 2004; PIC, 2009; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith, Smith, Ingersoll, 2004; Smith et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; West et al., 2012). In the state of Missouri, special educators have been reported on the nationwide shortage areas by the United States Department of Education (2015) every year through 2015, which directly affects the pipeline of future special education administrators. This information is not new to school districts and higher education; these patterns have been consistent for the last two decades and they cause considerable challenges to school districts who educate children with educational challenges (COPSSE, 2004; Arick, Krug, 1993; Billingsley et al., 2014; Brownell, Hirsch, Seo, 2004; Smith et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015; West et al., 2012).

Smith (2010) and her colleagues contend that "...if there is a shortage of special education teachers, there is a shortage in the supply pipeline for future faculty" (p. 37). The same conclusion can be drawn for special education administrators: "The shortage of administrators is well-documented, and the shortage of special education teachers

exacerbates the shortage of special education administrators” (Lashley et al., p. 18). School districts, then, must identify ways to increase the supply pipeline of highly qualified special education leaders. Research is being conducted at the higher education level that focuses on the supply of future faculty due to the shortage of special educators as colleges and universities are attempting to identify strategies to assist in recruiting candidates for special education leadership programs (NCPSE, 2003; Smith et al., 2010; Washburn-Moses et al., 2008; Voltz et al., 2010; West et al., 2012). Smith (2010) and West (2012) call for a national dialogue and plan of action to address these concerns as an anticipated shortage will only become larger. The same need for a plan of action applies for K-12 special education administrators.

Current research dictates that responding to these patterns is crucial for student success (Billingsley et al., 2014; Boscardin et al., 2011; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith et al., 2010; Voltz et al., 2010). “Meeting the needs of the nation’s growing and diverse student population requires maintaining strong, highly qualified, prepared effective teachers and administrators” (Sjostrom, p. 11). With the complexities of the current educational arena described earlier, it is more important than ever for special education leaders to have general education knowledge and for general education leaders to have special education knowledge (IDEiA, 2004; Keenoy, 2012; Lashley et al., 2003; Sjostrom, 2009; USDOE, 2015). Colleges and universities must devise recruitment methods to engage graduate students in special

education leadership programs (NCPSE, 2003; Smith et al., 2010; Smith, Truong, Watson, Hartley, Robb, Gilmore, 2011; Smith, Montrosse, 2012; Voltz et al., 2010; Washburn-Moses et al., 2008; West et al., 2012) and also work to intentionally incorporate special education skills and knowledge into general education leadership programs (IDEiA, 2004; Keenoy, 2012, Lashley et al., 2003). This would facilitate a deeper knowledge base for the school principal, thus increasing skills needed to understand the complex world of special education (Crockett, 2007; Keenoy, 2012; Lashley et al., 2003).

Similarly, school districts will need to create a strategic plan in order to address leadership shortages (SMHC, 2009). However, most school districts do not have the human capital to generate a comprehensive study addressing their specific administrative shortages. As a result, school districts do not have adequate solutions to the problem of selection, and more importantly, retention of school leaders (Billingsley et al., 2014; Normore, 2006; Pounder et al., 2005; Rammer, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; SMHC, 2009). Maintaining a team of inflexible administrators no longer works in the high stakes game of education (Sjostrom, 2009). Retention of current high quality special education leadership then, becomes increasingly important (Billingsley et al., 2014; SMHC, 2009).

National Attention

Clearly, the literature indicates that there is a significant shortage of special educators across the United States. As a result, many nationally recognized centers and task forces have been developed to tackle the

problem of the shortage of special educators in the United States. Each has a specialized function to improve the field of special education. The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education (COPSSE) is a consortium funded by the United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The universities involved in the project include the University of Florida and Johns Hopkins University. The focus of COPSSE is to provide research and insight into chronic and pressing special education personnel issues. COPSSE personnel analyze research and data trends and conduct additional research to address personnel issues surrounding special education.

Located on the University of Florida campus, the National Center to Inform Policy and Practice (NCIPP) in Special Education Professional Development is also funded by OSEP. The aim of this center is to inform national policy and practice to improve the quality and retention of special educators at all levels of the profession. The National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities was created in October 2008. Also known as the Personnel Improvement Center (PIC), this center is funded by a cooperative agreement between the OSEP and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). The mission of the Personnel Improvement Center is to improve the recruitment, preparation and retention of highly qualified special educators. They help states meet the need for highly qualified special education and related services personnel

by providing recruitment efforts and information about special education careers.

Another national center, the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (NCPSSERS) is a coalition whose sole purpose is to address the shortage of special educators. They sustain discussion surrounding the need and value of special education and related services. Their mission is to identify, influence and support implementation of national, state, and local policies to remedy personnel issues in special education (www.specialedshortages.org). The NCPSSERS website provides many tools to facilitate an understanding of the personnel phenomenon and dialogue on the national level. They have compiled the data from many sources and explained the data in easy to understand terms regarding the special education personnel shortage and its impact on children with disabilities.

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education, located on the University of Florida website, was designed to address the national personnel shortage of special educators and to assess the implementation of certain facets of IDEA. One survey in particular, the SPeNSE Special Education Administrator Survey, addresses many of the research questions posed for this study. Despite all the national attention and dialogue surrounding special education shortages, no effective plan has yielded the results of a declining special education administration shortage. This

further illustrates the need for school districts to retain their most effective administrators in order to diminish the impact of the ongoing national shortage of special educators.

TABLE 1.0

Funding Sources for Special Education Personnel

National Center or National Project	Funding Source	Purpose
Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education (COPSSE)	Office of Special Education Programs	Provide research for special education personnel issues; analyze research and data trends; conduct additional research
National Center to Inform Policy and Practice (NCIPP) in Special Education Professional Development	Office of Special Education Programs	Inform national policy and practice regarding quality and retention of special educators at all levels
National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities, also known as Personnel Improvement Center (PIC)	Office of Special Education Programs and National Association of State Directors of Special Education	Improve the recruitment, preparation and retention of highly qualified special educators
National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (NCPSSERS)	Coalition generated funds	Identify, influence and support implementation of national, state, and local policies to remedy personnel issues in special education

Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education	Congress	Studies designed to address personnel needs and assess aspects of IDEA 32vg
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Purpose Statement

Although the literature clearly identifies a shortage of special education administrators, the intent of this study is to determine what dynamics contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job or leaving the position, and to determine incentives that motivate special education administrators to remain in special education administration. Strategies may be identified to assist school districts in creating a plan of action to sustain the pipeline of special education administrators (Pounder et al., 2005; Sjoström, 2009).

Research Questions

1. What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrator turnover?
2. What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrators remaining in special education leadership?
3. What incentives and strategies would allow school districts to retain former or current high quality special education administrators to remain in special education administration?

Significance of Study

This study would support the literature identifying reasons why there is a significant shortage in the field of special education leadership. In the small body of historical literature on special education leadership, the primary focus has been to describe the tasks of the special education administrator (Finkenbinder, 1981; Howe, 1981; NCPSE, 2001; Sjostrom, 2009; Whitworth et al., 1979). Researchers have studied the availability, licensure, and preparation of special education administrators (Arick et al., 1993; Boscardin et al., 2010; Crockett, 2002; Lashley et al., 2003; Powers, 2001; Whitworth et al., 1979). Boscardin et al. (2010) argued that "in the current educational climate of high accountability that includes all educators being highly qualified, it would seem reasonable to expect rigorous state credentialing requirements for administrators of special education" (p. 74). However, that is not the case. "...National data from this study indicate that only a little over half of the states require [licensure, certification or endorsement] for administrators of special education" (p. 74). The Personnel Improvement Center (2009) affiliated with the National Association for State Directors of Special Education has conducted research to improve recruitment and retention efforts of special educators. The PIC worked at the national, state, and local levels to improve the capacity for recruitment and communication about special education careers (PIC, 2015). The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special

Education (2003) has made recommendations to institutions of higher education for recruitment into graduate education programs.

Additionally, substantial federal funding has been provided to ensure the pipeline continues to flow (Kleinhammer-Trammil et al., 2010, Kleinhammer-Trammil, Westbrook, 2009). "Currently more than 100 graduate students nationwide are federally funded to pursue degrees in special education administration. Preparation is most often provided at the doctoral level with graduates assuming leadership positions in local school districts, and federal and state education departments" (Billingsley et al., p. 105). Deborah Deutsch Smith (2004; 2010) and her colleagues have addressed the significant contributions of special education leaders as well as the scarcity of special education administrators.

Bonnie Billingsley (2014) and her collaborators have written about recruitment and retention of special education administrators. They contend more research needs to be conducted to identify "...why individuals remain in (or leave) their jobs" (Billingsley et al., p. 94). Billingsley et al. indicated that a NASDSE survey with "...55% of respondents reported that the attrition of local special education directors posed a significant challenge in their states" (p. 104). They reported retirements, special education compliance and legal proceedings, increased data collection frequency, and working conditions as reasons for the attrition in order of ranking (Billingsley et al., 2014). Cheryl Sjostrom (2009) conducted her dissertation research on the shortage of special education administrators in

California. She conveys the urgency of the situation: "...it is imperative for school districts to explore promising direction to identify, attract, and provide support to aspiring administrators to carry the baton as leaders in the field" (Sjostrom, p. 17). Sjostrom contends school districts must implement systematic plans to address current and future needs.

Despite these relevant studies, there is still a serious lack of literature providing answers to the special education leadership shortage. Consequently, there is a correlating insufficient amount of research existing that identifies barriers school districts encounter while struggling with retaining special education administrators. Few strategies exist to provide school districts with tools to combat the shortage of special education administrators. There has been little research conducted to address motivational factors that contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job as well. Stephens et al. (2010) indicates a need to tap into the narratives of successful special educators to determine what influences their decision to remain in special education despite the many articulated challenges they face.

This study would contribute to the dialogue about potential incentives and motivational factors that influence whether a special education administrator remains in the field of special education or not. This study would also give a voice to the reasons why educators choose to leave their vital roles as special education leadership. While there is an abundance of literature surrounding the retention of special education

teachers and what they need to remain on the job, special education administrators have different needs and requirements to remain on the job (Billingsley, McLeskey, 2004; Billingsley, 2005; Brownell et al., 2004; COPSSE, 2004; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010; Gehrke, Murray, 2007; Gonzalez, 2008; Grier, 2008; NCPSE, 1998; PIC, 2015; Smith, 2004; Smith, 2010; Stronge, Hindman, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Literature addressing retention efforts for school leaders focuses on general education administrators and most often, building principals. Noticeably, the literature does not provide school districts with specific strategies for retaining special education administrators (Normore, 2006; Pounder et al., 2005; Rammer, 2007; Sjoström, 2009).

There are several ways that this research can help to improve professional practice as school districts attempt to retain high quality special education administrators. The No Child Left Behind Act (2004) increases a school district's need for high quality school leaders. Due to these increased accountability measures, it is necessary to bring all tools of education together to support all students learning (Bakken et al., 2006; Bays et al., 2007; Boscardin, 2007; Lashley, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, Diamond, 2001; Spillane, 2003; Spillane, 2005). In January 2015, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2015) called for replacing NCLB with a new Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that continues to raise expectations for all children and all schools celebrating the progress made toward "full educational opportunity" (p. 2). In order for students with

educational disabilities to realize their potential, the best special education leaders need to be retained to facilitate classroom environments where all students can learn. Principals cannot take on this task alone (Keenoy, 2012).

This study intends to provide needed research that school districts are unable to conduct on their own. The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (1998) argues that “the literature is replete with findings and suggestions” surrounding the shortage of special education personnel (p. 1). They contend that “...little information is available that identifies practical, realistic school-based practices that consider the resources available to local education agencies” (p.1). As early as 2001, a report from the United States General Accounting Office revealed that their “...studies of private and public sector organizations have shown, high-performing organizations focus on valuing and investing in their employees—human capital—and on aligning their ‘people policies’ to support organizational performance goals” (Mihm, p. 1). Similarly, the intent is to provide school districts tools to retain the best special education leaders as school systems do not have the human capital to conduct a full scale study to address the ‘people policies’ of special education administrator turnover or retention.

Currently, there is a small amount of literature available on existing retention strategies or the effectiveness of strategies that school districts use. Additionally, there is minimal research available that addresses the

barriers that school districts face with regard to retaining special education administrators. However, due to the multiple decade shortage of special education administrators, the logical conclusion is that barriers must exist for school districts. In order to improve the chronic state of accepting unqualified or mediocre candidates, school districts must develop a plan to focus their retention efforts on keeping effective human capital already within their ranks. Research is not readily available for school districts to use other than those resources generated for general education school leadership. This study intends to fill a void in the literature by identifying dynamics that influence special education administrator turnover, what considerations keep them remaining on the job as well as information about what special education administrators report as valuable incentives and motivational factors that will keep them in the field.

Grimmett and Echols (2000) argue that policy makers have an obligation to address policies that support the development of a strategic plan dealing with the administrative shortage. They also encourage policy makers to take a close look at the organizational and work cultures as a means to impact the working environment of administrators. Gehrke et al. (2006) also recommends exploration of "workplace factors" that influence career decisions for special educators. Normore (2006) contends that there is a need for "...more empirical research on the range of best practices and effective strategies available..." for school districts to utilize. This study intends to discover recommendations for policy makers that may

be useful in their work to retain special education administrators.

Delimitations

The study will be conducted in May and June 2016. To further focus the lens of the study, the school districts selected for participation will be identified as the sole providers of special education and related services for students with educational disabilities in the state of Missouri. Those surveyed in this study consisted of current and former special education administrators working for these districts. The study included school districts that matched the corresponding selection criteria which included a) designation as a "special" school district, b) having a separate tax base from their partner school districts, and c) at least 50% of administrators employed were designated as special education administrators.

Assumptions

1. The sample studied was representative of the total population of special education administrators of "special" school districts.
2. The sample studied was representative of the total population of special education administrators in general education school districts.
3. Certain incentives will be reported to increase retention among special education administrators.
4. Salary increases cause many special education administrators to leave for other positions or other districts.

Definition of Terms:

Special education administrator: Individuals who work in school districts to lead, supervise, and manage the provision of special education and related services for students with disabilities. SEAs are responsible for implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEiA) as well as state and local statutes for the provision of special education and services (Lashley et al., 2003).

Special School District: A school district, with its own tax base, that specializes in providing special education, related services and technical education for all students in St. Louis County and Pemiscott County, Missouri (www.ssdmo.org) and (www.pcssd.k12.mo.us). There are only three special school districts in the entire United States.

Human capital: An intangible asset that lies within employees and has potential to add value to the organization (Heneman, Milanowski, 2007).

Strategic management of human capital: "...Represents the conceptual framework of macro strategies for actually transforming the human capital in ways that will contribute to the sustained strategic success of the organization" (Heneman et al., p. 5).

Organization of Study

The remainder of the study is organized into four chapters, references, and Appendices. Chapter II presents a review of the related literature surrounding the shortage of highly qualified special education administrators. Chapter III explains the selected research design and

methodology of the study, and the rationale for the choices made. Data collected include individual online surveys and semi-structured interviews. Data analyses and interpretations will appear in Chapter IV. Chapter V consists of an overall synopsis of the study, implications for practice, concluding thoughts, and recommendations for further investigation within the field of special education leadership.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recruitment of Teachers

The majority of school districts invest vast amounts of time, effort, and money into hiring and retaining the highest quality teachers (Billingsley, 2005; COPSSE, 2004; David, 2008; Fish et al., 2010; Grimmatt, Echols, 2000; Harris, 2014; Kleinhammer-Tramill, Tramill, Westbrook, 2009; Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2010; Stronge et al., 2003). School districts take specific actions to attract and recruit new candidates (COPSSE, 2004; David, 2008; Fish et al., 2010; Harris, 2014; SPeNSE, 2002; SPeNSE, 2002; SPeNSE, 2002). Relationships are cultivated and nurtured with area colleges and universities which, in turn, provide school districts with many pre-service teachers ready to learn "on the job" (COPSSE, 2004; SPeNSE, 2002; SPeNSE, 2002). School districts send representatives to job fairs conducted by area colleges and universities in attempts to find quality recruits that may not have been considering their district. Advertisements are placed in local newspapers and online resources are secured (COPSSE, 2004; SPeNSE, 2002; David, 2008).

Voltz and Collins (2010) recognize "the need for special education administrators (SEAs) to have strong skills in recruitment" as well other leadership skills. Some administrators are trained in the art of conducting interviews (Stronge et al., 2003) while others are not "particularly skillful when it comes to hiring" decisions (Harris, p. 1). An entire department is

devoted to the acquisition of new staff; in larger districts the department is generally called human resources.

Once the recruitment process has ended and teachers are hired, school districts must begin implementation of retention strategies to retain their top staff. School districts provide inconsistent levels of professional development for newly graduated and experienced teachers, ranging from no professional development to structured programs for multiple years (SPeNSE, 2002; SPeNSE, 2002; David, 2008). Similar to some school districts, Special School District of St. Louis County, Missouri requires a three-year training regimen for new teachers beginning their tenure with the district. Teachers with no previous experience must also participate in a mentoring program with a trained mentor professional for at least two years. Supervisors evaluate new teachers' performance numerous times during the first years of teaching in order to determine whether this is someone the district should retain as a tenured teacher.

A negotiating team determines which issues are brought to the district as contractual or philosophical ideas to address via collective bargaining. The negotiating team spends countless hours and many sessions trying to create a "win-win" situation in which both sides leave the bargaining table feeling as though they have contributed to the positive aspects of the newly developed contract. This, ultimately, means that the teachers get a salary raise in addition to some new benefits or changes to their work environment (Rebore, 2001). There are many facets of

educational systems in place that support the hiring and retention of teachers.

Recruitment of Administrators

However, school districts spend so much effort on the acquisition of high quality teachers they may make assumptions regarding the quality of their administrative candidate pool. School districts in the United States often struggle to hire and retain high quality administrators (Bakken et al., 2006; COPSEE, 2004; Harris, 2014; Sergiovanni, 2002; Pandiscio, 2005; Sjoström, 2009; Litchka, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2009). Marzano (2005) believes there is significant importance in the selection of school leaders as they have a tremendous impact on student achievement and the overall school environment. There is also substantial research indicating that special education teachers' perception of administrative support is one of the most important factors in their decision to remain in their position (Billingsley, 2005; Fish et al., 2010; Gehrke et al., 2006; SPeNSE, 2002; SPeNSE, 2002).

Impacting the equation, the numbers of retiring administrators far outweigh the number of candidates entering the field of educational administration (Boscardin et al., 2010; Crockett, 2007; Fish et al., 2010; Sjoström, 2009). Often, districts are unable to find highly qualified candidates to fill their administrative ranks according to the National Association for Secondary School Principals (Litchka, 2007). Due to the law of supply and demand, districts are forced to select lesser qualified

candidates because there are so few highly qualified administrative candidates to consider (Boscardin et al., 2010; COPSSE, 2004; Crockett, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith et al., 2011).

The Nationwide Shortage

The turnover rates for administrative positions are significantly higher than that of teacher positions; significant enough to be at all-time crisis levels in the United States (Boscardin et al., 2010; COPSSE, 2004; Crockett, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith et al., 2011). Boscardin and her colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of licensure requirements in the United States. They contend that special education administrator (SEA) role confusion, a lack of consistent expectations around licensure and credentialing procedures for SEAs, and the elimination of special education leadership programs have the potential to “threaten the stability of the profession” (p. 71). This team expresses concern that national trends have been identified by researchers for decades, and all but ignored, and the figures continue to magnify each year. Federal funding has been allocated by the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs to facilitate growing the pool of leadership personnel in special education since at least 1975 (Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2010).

The federal government has identified special education personnel issues as funding priorities for five decades (Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2010). Kleinhammer-Tramill (2010) and her colleagues indicate

that leadership personnel have always made it to the top of the list of priorities for the allocated funds. This is supported by Deborah Deutsch Smith (2010) and her colleagues, yet issues of staffing special education administration personnel has remained for decades (Boscardin et al., 2010; COPSSE, 2004; Crockett, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Smith et al., 2011). "Trends in personnel preparation efforts [include] a) developing an adequate supply of personnel during the 1970s, [and] b) improving personnel quality during the 1980s" ... (p. 195). Early federal funding efforts were aimed at preparing doctoral-level personnel who, in turn, would "prepare future generations of teachers" for the field of special education (p. 196).

Kleinhammer-Tramill's team suggests that "the department has attempted to respond to shifts in federal education policy, advance knowledge about students with disabilities, and identify needs for a sufficient supply of well-prepared personnel" (p. 200). The same team also suggests further research on highly qualified teacher requirements due to increased demands of No Child Left Behind legislation as this increases the burden on personnel preparation programs. It is also suggested that with significant retirements imminent, removal of federal funds would decimate the special education personnel pipeline (2010). Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., contend that the overall goal of the Office of Special Education Program's investment in personnel preparation "is to improve the quantity and quality of personnel and build the capacity of professionals to meet the needs of diverse groups of children and youth with disabilities" (p. 201).

Jean Crockett (2007) discusses the development of the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education (COPSSE) at the University of Florida which was developed to address the supply and demand of SEAs. Funding is provided by the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. One of COPSSE's projects yielded potential research questions developed by an expert panel. Of the questions, one was "how school systems can both attract and retain high quality teachers and administrators" (Crockett, p. 141). Crockett illustrates a "changing landscape in special education administration" because some states are loosening requirements for SEA licensure in order to expand the pool of candidates available to school districts. Sometimes this leads to unqualified educators, like school principals, taking on the role of the SEA. Crockett's (2007) concerns surround a large number of retiring SEAs, and those vacancies being replaced by unqualified candidates during an opportunity of great reform and promise for students with special needs.

Sjostrom (2009) also advises of the nationwide shortage of special education administrators and cites a lack of supply of qualified staff as a primary issue. Sjostrom indicates a shortage of special education supervisors and administrators going back to the 1950s. Sjostrom argues that when shortages occur and positions go unfilled, other special education administrators who are overtaxed must pick up those additional job responsibilities which adds to increased burden and program

responsibility. The rationale provided when special education administrators leave the profession could all be directly or indirectly related to stress. Sjostrom identifies "intense stress" as a "reoccurring theme in the literature" (Sjostrom, p. 59). Other causative factors included "burdensome regulations, paperwork, and an inability to address personnel issues" (Sjostrom, p. 59). Additionally, a lack of resources and frequent legal actions perpetuate high stress levels that make the role difficult. Sjostrom (2009) argues that universities do not prepare special education administrators and school systems do not recruit, induct, retain or compensate the leaders in a corollary manner to their roles and responsibilities.

As Sjostrom argued, there are several factors that contribute to this seemingly permanent pattern of turnover. It appears that the literature can be categorized into major themes or categories. Key themes that emerge in the literature contributing to the administrator shortage in general include compensation, stress, time and work overload, politics of the position, and the ever changing role and increased expectations of educational leadership (COPSSE, 2004; Crockett, 2007; Normore, 2006; Sjostrom, 2009; Wheeler et al., 2009). Many teachers who possess administrative certification cite these premises as major deterrents to seeking the position (Litchka, 2007). They indicate that stress along with the significant time and work demands do not equate to the modest increase in salary when considering the hourly pay of the position (Litchka,

2007). Most would rather not take on the additional responsibility. These contributing factors would seem to have an impact on all educational leaders in the school setting. However, this body of literature overwhelmingly focuses on the school principal (Harris, 2014; Marzano, Walters, McNulty, 2005; Pandiscio, 2005; Ervay, 2006; Normore, 2006; Rammer, 2007). There is a fair amount of literature regarding other educational leaders within the school system, most of which focus on the superintendent (Buchanon, 2006; Murray, 2006; Pounder, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2002; Ullman, 2005).

Historical Literature

Until recently, almost all of the literature surrounding special education administration was inadequate and antiquated at best (Conner, 1961; COPSEE, 2004; Finkenbinder, 1981; Hebert, 1985; Howe, 1981; Lashley et al., 2003). In 2003, Lashley and Boscardin wrote a pivotal piece of literature titled "Special Education Administration at a Crossroads: Availability, Licensure, and Preparation of Special Education Administrators". Their research was funded by the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education. This article was one of the first written in more than two decades around special education leadership. They write that "special education administration is located at the intersection of the disciplines of special education, general education, and educational administration" (p. 4). They go on to describe that the shortage of special education teachers contributes to the shortage of special education

administrators which puts special education administration “at a crossroads” (p. 18). They maintain that today’s special education administrators must be prepared for 21st Century schools with a broader range of skills than they have traditionally held. Lashley and Boscardin’s research from 2003 focused on the “availability, licensure and certification, and preparation of special education administrators in K-12 public school districts with emphasis on their roles in maintaining a quality work force in special education” (p. 4). According to Lashley and Boscardin, “although the shortage of administrators in general has been widely reported, there has been less attention to the shortage of special education administrators” (p. 5). They go on to say that the shortage of special education teachers only exacerbates the shortage of special education administrators. Due to the wide variety of certification expectations around the United States, Lashley’s team indicates this makes it challenging to identify a high quality and highly qualified work force.

Historically, there have been few investigations into the challenges of acquiring and retaining high quality special education leadership. It is well documented that many authors indicate a need for such research to delve deeper and identify strategies to resolve the impasse that special education faces (Boscardin et al., 2010; Crockett, 2007; Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2010; Tyler, Montrosse, Smith, 2012; Voltz et al., 2010; Washburn-Moses et al., 2008; Wheeler et al., 2009; Smith et al.,

2011). Identification of strategies that can be replicated is one key to elimination of this shortage.

Contemporary literature has provoked a national dialogue about this ongoing educational crisis that Finkenbinder first wrote about in 1961. In September 2009, the *Journal of Special Education Leadership* dedicated an entire issue to the quantity and quality of special education administrators that are needed in this country (Provost, 2009). Provost states that "increasing the supply of special educators and decreasing attrition rates in the field of special education will continue to be important strategies in the efforts to strike a balance between the labor supply and demand..." (p.106). He indicates the quality of candidates is important as districts consider personnel and acquisition of talent. The United States Department of Education has acted through funding projects and centers, in addition to other strategies, to focus on this substantial predicament (Crockett, 2007; COPSSE, 2004; Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2010; Personnel Improvement Center, 2009; SPeNSE, 2013).

Although there is an abundance of literature available on the general topic of educational leadership, there is a smaller body of literature focusing specifically on the retention of building principals. Yet, an even smaller portion is dedicated to the selection of administrators. However, literature is not available addressing either the selection or retention of the special education administrator. In times of evolving special education laws and subsequent legal requirements,

increasingly complex student needs, increased accountability, high stakes testing and the requirement of meeting Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, it seems as though this void in the literature must be filled (COPSEE, 2004).

Effective Retention Strategies

In order to minimize the impact of the vast turnover rates in the field of educational administration, school districts must be able to identify effective strategies for retaining high quality administrators (Harris, 2014; Rammer, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; SMHC, 2009; Smith et al., 2010). Despite this knowledge, school districts often do not have a plan of action designed to increase retention of their current school leaders. School districts must make a strategic effort to attract and, more importantly, retain their highly qualified administrative teams (Harris, 2014, SMHC, 2009).

There has been scarce research on factors that contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job as well. Toups (2006) illustrates factors that support mentoring impacts one's desire to support other special education administrators as they enter the field. She contends a solid mentoring program increases the likelihood of remaining on the job in special education administration. Special educators face compelling challenges such as "job complexity, lack of adequate training...and shortage of applicants" (p. 5). Toups claims that the responsibilities and complexity of the job can be difficult, and the foundation that a mentoring relationship can provide can have a lasting

and positive impact on both the mentor and the mentee. She believes that “mentoring can promote other special education personnel into the field of special education administration and decrease expected shortages of personnel” (p. 5). However, mentoring programs for special education administrators are unavailable or undeveloped in many areas. This could prove to be an effective strategy for states and school districts to consider as Toups' study results revealed strong support for mentoring (2006).

Stephens et al., (2010) indicates a need to tap into successful special educators to determine what influences their decision to remain in special education leadership despite the numerous responsibilities they face. Hebert and Miller provide character context indicating significant challenges require that a special education administrator “must be a strong, secure, and flexible personality in order to function effectively in that role” (p. 228). This is consistent with more recent literature by Boscardin (2009) and her team that reviews the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards and the Council of Administrators of Special Education Professional Standards for Administrators of Special Education.

The ISLLC Standards were designed to create a model for leadership and policy standards that guide educational leadership and professional practice (Boscardin, McCarthy, Delgado 2009; ISLLC, 2008). The ISLLC Standards include setting vision; developing school culture

around student and staff learning; management of operations and resources; collaboration; integrity and ethics; and responding to political, social, legal and cultural contexts (ISLLC, 2008). Similar to the ISLLC Standards, CASE proposed six standards for special education administrators “designed as guidelines to be used to create a vision, develop policy, and provide practice parameters” for states, colleges and universities, and school districts (p. 78). The Administrator of Special Education Standards target the following: leadership and policy; program development and organization; research and inquiry; evaluation; professional development and ethical practice; and collaboration (Boscardin et al., 2009). Table 1.1 describes the relationship between the two sets of standards. It is clear; there is a desire for consistency for special education administrators across the United States. However, given special education leadership’s relative infancy to educational leadership, there is more work to be done (Boscardin et al., 2009).

Table 1.1

How CASE Standards correlate with ISLLC Standards

PERFORMANCE-BASED SPECIAL EDUCATION STANDARDS	ISLLC STANDARDS
1. Foundations (philosophical, historical, legal); no ISLLC Standard	1. Shared vision of learning
2. Characteristics of learners (human development, principles of learning); ISLLC 1 & 2	2. Culture & programs conducive to student & personnel learning
3. Assessment, diagnosis & evaluation	3. Safe, efficient & effective learning environments
4. Instructional content & practice; ISLLC 1 & 2	4. Collaboration & working with the community
5. Planning & managing the teaching & learning environment; ISLLC 3	5. Ethical behavior
6. Managing student behavior & social interactions; ISLLC 3 & 6	6. Understanding & influencing political, social, economic, legal & cultural contexts
7. Communication & collaborative partnerships; ISLLC 4	
8. Professionalism & ethics; ISLLC 5	

High Quality Special Education Administrators

Unqualified or low quality candidates replacing special education administrators create problems for school districts because these administrators need to be better prepared for their roles in inclusive

standards-based schools (Voltz et al, 2010). "These challenges create the need for new skills required for effective special education leaders in the 21st century" (p. 70). Voltz and Collins argue that in order for public schools to close the achievement gap, special education administrators must have a high level of skill in order to successfully support a diverse learning environment that is presented with the challenge of standards-based reform. They believe that "special education administrators must be prepared to take leadership roles in moving forward with this agenda" (p. 71). However, when conducting an analysis of survey data reported by special education administrators, Voltz and Collins found that SEAs "felt highly skilled in less than half of the CEC [Council for Exceptional Children] standards, with assessment and collaboration competencies being in the lowest-rated quartile" (p. 71). Additionally, SEAs "expressed a lack of confidence in the ability of special education teachers to teach students to state standards" (p. 71). With teachers lacking skills with regard to state standards, "[t]hese findings underscore the need for special education administrators to be prepared to rise to this important challenge as leaders" (p. 71).

Summarizing several researchers, Voltz and Collins declare that "special education administrators will need new knowledge and skills to rise to the challenge of facilitating the successful inclusion of diverse students with disabilities in standards-based classrooms" (p. 72). This expertise is necessary as they support and strengthen the skills of their

teachers. Furthermore, strong collaboration skills are necessary, not only to ensure that teachers have supportive relationships from building principals, but in working with all of the professionals and families that surround the child. Voltz and Collins (2010) advocate for special education administrators having general education course of study, so they have a solid foundation and understanding.

Boscardin (2011) and her team responded to Voltz and Collins' 2010 article utilizing the Council for Exceptional Children's Administrator of Special Education Standards adopted in 2009, but not utilized in the Voltz article. Recognizing the need for a higher standard, the CEC's Professional Standards and Practices Committee evaluated the previous 2003 standards, which were a combination of entry level, or teacher level standards and administrator standards. Many of the standards applied to classroom practice rather than administration (2011). The revision inquiry was explored and analyzed through a rigorous nationwide process detailed by Boscardin et al. (2009). The result was "a collaborative effort among policy makers, education leaders, and professional organizations to produce revised, evidence-based standards" (p. 73). The updated version would require not only "initial or entry level competency but acquisition of the advanced knowledge and skills needed to be effective in their leadership positions" (p. 73). The updated SEA standards "were built on CEC's six Advanced Common Core (ACC) standards...and they are

leadership focused and have been elevated from the initial to the advanced level" (p. 73).

Boscardin's (2011) team asserts, and the CEC standards support, that candidates must meet basic competencies before attaining the proficiency to become a special education administrator. Instructional leadership and collaboration are two key areas that Boscardin indicates are essential that SEAs must possess. Strong instructional leadership was associated with access to and a flexible continuum of services both resulting in positive student outcomes. "Standard 6, Collaboration, places direct emphasis on the necessary knowledge and skills to bring stakeholders together to provide high-quality services to students with exceptionalities and their families" (p. 76). Boscardin et al., report that of survey participants contributing, "consulting and collaborating in administrative and instructional decisions at the school and district level" was determined to be the most important of all rankings (2009, p. 76).

Boscardin (2010) and her colleagues stress the significance of the highly qualified special education administrator. "Following the passage of No Child Left Behind and with the advent of Race to the Top, all teachers are required to be highly qualified. However, little has been written about the qualifications of educational administrators, and administrators of special education in particular" (p. 61). Boscardin's team illustrates that 27 of 50 states have shifted "licensing practices...in concert with national trends that demand greater accountability and a highly qualified

workforce" (p. 71). These states require a separate licensure, endorsement or certification for special education administrators, thus, maintaining a highly qualified workforce with the capacity to support the delivery of high quality research-based special education programs. These leaders have "strong professional identities" that "set expectations of what it means to be a professional. Without this model of professionalism, there is a risk of ambiguity and erosion that challenges role identities" (p. 71).

This is not consistent with the expectations that are in place for special education teachers in relation to highly qualified status for all 50 states across the nation. National data indicates there is not a reasonable expectation for SEAs to have the same rigorous credentialing requirement. The authors express significant concerns when states combine general education certification requirements with SEA requirements, thus, lessening the highly qualified status of the SEA. "Continuing education is a noticeable addition to credentialing requirements for administrators of special education since the passage of No Child Left Behind.... This ensures the development of evidence-based leadership practices that, in turn, are linked to improved instructional practices by teachers, and translate to increased educational outcomes for students" (p. 72). Boscardin (2010) and her team continue to justify the need for high quality SEAs as dictated by the passage of No Child Left Behind.

Strategic Management of Human Capital

Another nationwide project was created to address human resource and personnel concerns in a systematic way to bring excellence to urban schools. Efforts were made by a task force assembled in 2008 to reform the nation's 100 largest urban school districts. This powerful task force, comprised of 33 politicians and educators, was called Strategic Management of Human Capital (SMHC, 2009). SMHC put together a multitude of resources and a website for states and local school districts to use that could help districts develop plans to recruit and retain capable teachers and principals. SMHC affirms that the key to student success is "having an effective teacher in every classroom and an effective principal in every building" (p. 1). This same sentiment can be argued about effective special education leadership. Some of their recommended strategies could be applied to special education leadership.

SMHC asserts that "recruiting and developing talent, building organizational capacity, redesigning human resource departments and tying them to school improvement plans, must emerge as guiding paths to school reform" (p. 1). SMHC (2009) argues that "strategic management of human capital is the systematic process of aligning school district academic goals with school district organization and practices, from curriculum and assessment to teacher and administrator recruitment, retention and compensation" (p. 1) and this does not happen in most school districts.

The Strategic Management of Human Capital (2009) project developed 20 recommendations that would have a dramatic impact on education and would require political, teacher organization and district support

- Having teachers who demonstrate effective teaching skills and content mastery;
- Maintaining constant, focused programs to develop and improve teaching and instruction;
- Casting a wide net for teacher and principal talent: broadening and deepening the recruiting pool to improve talent quality;
- Funding multiple routes to certification and holding all graduates to the same high standards;
- Extending and improving teacher and principal induction and residency;
- Creating performance-based evaluations for hiring, promoting and professional development;
- Raising standards for promotion and tenure;
- Rewarding high performance;
- Basing rewards on student achievement and instructional effectiveness;
- Aligning HR departments and practices with district goals;
- Knowing how to manage education talent strategically; and
- Using robust data systems for HR operations and in systems to measure teaching effectiveness and student learning (p. 2).

SMHC's (2009) stance is that states and districts must have policies and practices that appeal to the best candidates in the field. The task force suggests using data systems to strategically identify the universities and programs that generate the best and most effective graduates both at the teacher and principal level. Districts also must be willing to "reward those who are most successful" (p. 3).

In addition to the 20 recommendations for local school districts, the SMHC (2009) developed six guiding principles that states could follow. Alignment is the theme that weaves the six principles together, and is the concept that allows the strategic management of human capital to manifest. "The core focus should be to recruit the top teacher and principal talent, develop that talent throughout careers to be ever-more effective, and link rewards, career opportunities and sanctions to effectiveness" (p. 4). SMHC Principle 1 is "improve performance, close the gap" (p. 4). "The ultimate goal of SMHC-to produce substantial improvement in student learning-requires districts to create a coherent transformation strategy that affects student achievement" ...which also includes strategies for teacher and administrator instructional leadership (p. 4).

SMHC Principle 2 addresses "effective teachers in every classroom, effective leaders in every school" (p. 5). SMHC posits that "districts need a talent strategy to acquire, develop, train, reward, and retain the most effective people" (p. 5).

SMHC Principle 3 states that there should be "excellent instruction, successful learning" (p. 5). "Successful districts identify, articulate and measure the knowledge, skills, and competencies that teachers and

principals need to realize the system's vision for teaching and learning" (p. 5).

SMHC Principle 4 illustrates the importance of "strategic human capital management, system alignment, continuous improvement" (p. 6). SMHC contends that "districts manage human capital strategically when their systems --curriculum, instruction, professional development, IT, accountability, and HR--are coordinated and work together" (p. 6). Human capital is successfully managed when educator skills and tools are continually improved to meet the district improvement strategies (2009). "Well-designed human capital management systems should continually improve the workforce by hiring those with the greatest potential to be effective, providing career-long professional development, rewarding effective performers, improving average performers, and improving (or ultimately removing) low performers" (p. 6).

SMHC Principle 5 outlines strategies for compensation "rewards and consequences: rethinking career progression and pay" (p. 6). "Schools--like any system--need comprehensive, performance-based evaluation systems that accurately differentiate among higher and lower performing teachers and principals" (p. 6). SMHC (2009) believes that excellence should be "recognized and rewarded generously" (p. 7) while struggling performers should be given opportunities for improvement or if inadequate improvement is made, they should be dismissed.

SMHC Principle 6 "core competencies: explicit, transparent, accountable" (p. 7). "District HR management quality is measured by its success in supporting and realizing the district's education improvement

strategy" (p. 7). SMHC argues that districts must take the next step and align their HR improvement strategies to include "SMHC metrics that link student learning to teacher and principal performance and which guide the system in overall human capital management" (p. 7). The task force says this will ultimately "measure the quality of their human capital and evaluate how successfully the systems perform" (p. 7).

In addition to the 20 recommendations and six principles, SMHC (2009) recommends state action steps that each state should take in order to raise the bar for education. The task force firmly believes that "states should launch policies and strategies to recruit, develop, reward and retain top teacher and principal talent" (p. 7). To make that happen, SMHC says states must have an improvement strategy tied to precise state curriculum standards and relevant assessments, a talent strategy "to make sure a talented teacher is in every classroom and a talented principal is in every school", and finally, a funding strategy to support the improvement and talent strategies (p. 7-8). The task force argues for alternate licensing methods for those fields, including special education, which are experiencing a shortage.

SMHC argues for policy change including closing schools and universities who have ineffective programs and produce low quality graduates. Instead, SMHC (2009) would prefer to see independent organizations become eligible for state funding because they are able to produce high quality talent, organizations like Teach For America, The New

Teacher Project, and The National Institute for School Leaders. Many of the policy recommendations apply to teachers and directly impact the classroom. However, there are two that correlate to administration. The SMHC (2009) task force says that states should put policies in place to develop performance-based evaluation as well as performance-based pay systems for administrators. They believe that when students achieve, administrators should receive an incentive bonus.

SMHC (2009) makes one thing clear: local school districts must use 21st century human resources methods to ensure acquiring highly qualified talent for their districts. They must “open pathways for highly qualified applicants to secure teaching and principal positions, opportunities and incentives to strengthen their performance, leadership that continues to inspire, and clear standards to provide every educator a road map for success” (p. 12). One method identified is expanding the pipeline.

SMHC (2009) found that this included solidifying partnerships with colleges and universities, and also reaching out to independent organizations like Teach For America, Academy for Urban School Leadership or New Leaders for New Schools. Some cities, like Chicago, recruited within a 500-mile radius. Others built specific partnerships with universities and teachers unions. Many districts also created alternate paths from teacher leadership to administrative ranks. SMHC (2009) indicates that school districts should continue to evaluate which strategies

prove to be the most effective for them whether it is university partnerships, “grow your own” recruitment, or alternative certification programs.

In addition to expanding the pipeline, teacher and principal selection should also become more rigorous, according to SMHC. This will, in turn, impact the effectiveness of teachers and administrators selected. This “recruitment strategy should reflect the district's education vision and only people who can support the school's goals and strategies should be offered jobs in the system” (p. 13). Once the screening process takes place, then building interviews determine a good fit without interference from central office.

The task force clearly states that “all HR programs--recruitment, induction, professional development, evaluation, compensation, and career development--should be designed to reinforce” competencies specifically set forth by the district (p. 15). SMHC contends that school district “compensation systems should align with and reinforce...intrinsic motivation” (p. 16). They believe that compensation systems should reward effectiveness, student performance, and argue that effective systems do this by recognizing and rewarding talent. These systems retain highly effective teachers and administrators while discouraging those who do not meet expectations.

Compensation systems should “reward, promote, and retain effective” employees and SMHC believes states should adopt these strategies (p. 16). Finally, SMHC suggests that school districts restructure

their human resources departments to “marry HR with standards, assessments, professional development, data, and accountability.... Thus, districts must move into more strategic management of human capital” (p. 17). All along the way, technology must be integrated with all of these aspects in order to ensure coordinated access and alignment of all human capital management tools. SMHC (2009) believes every student needs highly qualified and capable educators in every classroom and in every building.

Conclusion

Special education administration is at a crossroads. Not only are we at the intersection of special education, general education, and educational administration (Lashley et al., 2003), but we are also at the intersection of highly qualified educators, increasing rigor and standards, and specialized instruction (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett, 2007; Sjoström, 2009; Voltz et al., 2010). As special education administrators, it is vital that students with special needs be provided with the best special education services possible in order to close their learning gaps (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett, 2007; Sjoström, 2009; Voltz et al., 2010). In order to do that, school districts must attract and retain the best and most highly qualified special education administrators (Sjoström, 2009; SMHC, 2009).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The methodology used to conduct this basic qualitative research study is defined in Chapter III. This chapter describes the rationale and assumptions, the type of design selected, the researcher's role in the process, site selection, data sources utilized, data collection techniques, managing and recording data, data analysis procedures utilized, methods for verification or trustworthiness, and limitations of the study.

Purpose Statement

Although the literature clearly identifies a shortage of special education administrators, the intent of this study is to determine what factors contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job or leaving the position, and to determine incentives that motivate special education administrators to remain in special education administration. Strategies may be identified to assist school districts in creating a plan of action to sustain the pipeline of special education administrators (Pounder et al., 2005; Sjostrom, 2009). The purpose of this research is "to uncover and understand what lies behind [this] phenomenon about which little yet is known" (Roberts, p. 143).

Research Questions

1. What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrator turnover?

2. What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrators remaining in special education leadership?
3. What incentives and strategies would allow school districts to retain former or current high quality special education administrators to remain in special education administration?

Research Design

A qualitative design was selected in order “to uncover and understand what lies behind [this] phenomenon about which little yet is known” (Roberts, p. 143). In this naturalistic inquiry, the researcher is seeking to understand the decisions behind the phenomenon of special education administrator turnover. In naturalistic inquiry, “...research is conducted in real world settings; no attempt is made to manipulate the environment. Researchers are interested in the meanings people attach to the activities and events in their world and are open to whatever emerges” (Roberts, p. 143). Educational researchers, in particular, have used a wide range of qualitative research methods to conduct studies for more than four decades (Merriam, 2009).

More narrowly defined, an applied research method will be utilized. Merriam specifies, “Applied research is undertaken to improve the quality of a particular discipline. Applied social science researchers...hope their work will be used by administrators and policymakers to improve the way things are done” (p. 3-4). An applied research design was chosen as the

study presents more of a problem-based inquiry rather than a knowledge generating inquiry. Salkind states, "The most basic distinction between the two types of research is that basic research (sometimes called pure research) is research that has no immediate application at the time it is completed, whereas applied research does" (p. 15). Salkind (2012) reports that, historically, practitioners working in their field select applied research methodology. Courtney explains,

It is more concerned with the practical application concepts of research methodology. Experience in the formal techniques in the field is the primary basis for applied research. In order for this type of research to be meaningful, the student must have background in both the general and specialized areas of education (1965, p. 1-2).

This study hopes to generate potential solutions to a significant problem in the field of special education leadership by talking directly to special education administrators who are leaving these positions. A purely qualitative approach was selected to help the researcher gain an understanding of what thought process goes into a special education administrator's decision making when considering a job change, insight into the thought process of those special education administrators who leave their positions, and to assist in identifying what factors contribute to special education administrators' decisions to remain in this role. An online survey will be conducted in addition to semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. These combined approaches will allow the investigator to develop a deeper understanding of the obstacles that school districts encounter selecting and retaining special education administrators. Rich description will present participant narratives and

personal perspectives from the special education administrators themselves.

Merriam is a strong proponent of qualitative research; "... [she believes] that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p. 1). This work aims to make a difference for school districts as well as current and future special education administrators. By identifying current human capital practices, barriers to retention, and necessary incentives, this work seeks to identify key strategies that school districts may use to formulate a strategic human capital management plan to retain high quality special education administrators.

Population and Sample

The study was conducted in two Special School Districts the state of Missouri: one located in Pemiscot County, Missouri and the other located in St. Louis County, Missouri. The sample was drawn from these two selected school districts because more than 50% of their administrative ranks are special education administrators. Thus, these districts have a more specialized population to focus the research efforts. Individuals selected to participate are special education administrators who have left their positions to fulfill another role. They are or were employed by Special School Districts in the state of Missouri.

The school districts were located in two different regions of the state; one was rural while the other was suburban. In Pemiscot County, they work in collaboration with seven general education component school districts, and in St. Louis County, there are twenty-two general education “partner” school districts. In Pemiscot County, the SSD provides special and technical education services to approximately 3,500 students per year. In St. Louis County, the SSD provides special and technical education services to approximately 27,000 students per year.

Sampling Procedures

In this research study, a unique sample was utilized initially based on the exceptionality of the Special School Districts in the state of Missouri. The designation of providing special education services exclusively means they employ a larger number of special education administrators than other school districts do. After the school districts were identified, two additional sampling methods were utilized to identify research participants.

Next, purposeful sampling was utilized to further identify study participants. According to Merriam (2009), purposeful sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.77). She contends that the power of purposeful sampling comes from those who are knowledgeable and have information central to the research that can contribute most to the study. This process was utilized when contacting executive leadership in each school district.

Lastly, network sampling was employed to gather participants. According to Merriam (2009), “network sampling is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling” (p. 79). Network sampling is described as a participant in the study uncovers new potential participants for the researcher (Merriam, 2009). Network sampling was utilized to gather potential research participants from current study participants during both the survey and the interview process.

It is not possible to predetermine a sample size for this study. The number of individuals selected for participation in this study is based on the number of individuals who have left their positions as special education administrators during the last three school years. Criteria used for consideration included the participant having a job assignment of special education administrator and then leaving that job assignment for another role.

Selection of the purposeful samples was conducted initially by contacting the assistant superintendent of human resources for SSD of St. Louis County and the superintendent of Pemiscot County SSD via electronic mail. Network sampling was conducted through surveys and with participants as part of the interview protocol. The researcher also conducted network sampling by sending out electronic mail to individual special education administrators asking if they knew of potential study participants.

Instrumentation

Based on the type of study designed and the type of data the researcher is intending to collect, a survey and interview protocol are the appropriate instruments to collect such data. Roberts (2010) denotes that validity is defined as "...the degree to which your instrument truly measures what it purports to measure. In other words, can you trust that the findings from your instrument are true?" (p. 151). One Education Leadership doctoral student, two special education administrators and a special education administrator focus group have reviewed the survey questions and ensured they correlate with the Research Questions. Throughout the dissertation process, the researcher continually gathered feedback informally from special education administrators working in the field. They continued to provide positive feedback and encouragement for the study. The interview questions align with the survey questions and provide the opportunity to expand answers. Because qualitative researchers "can never capture an objective 'truth' or 'reality'" (Merriam, p. 215), there are strategies that researchers can employ to improve trustworthiness.

One method utilized in this study was a strategy called member checks. This strategy, also known as respondent validation, is conducted by soliciting feedback from participants who have been interviewed. The researcher asks the participant if the researcher's interpretation is accurate. This can be done throughout the course of the interview and study. Reliability refers to the extent to which the study is reproducible

(Merriam, 2009; Walker, 1985). When qualitative researchers apply rigorous and transparent methods, reliability is likely to increase (Walker, 1985). This survey and interview protocol will be able to be replicated for future research studies when requested.

Another strategy, called the researcher's position, or reflexivity, is described as analytically reflecting on one's role as investigator in the study (Merriam, 2009). This strategy will be employed as the researcher was a special education administrator who left the position prior to the initiation of this doctoral study. In this situation, the investigator will explain biases, dispositions, and assumptions with regard to the research being examined.

A third strategy that will be utilized to strengthen trustworthiness will be peer review. The peer review process built into the dissertation committee process according to Merriam (2009). However, the researcher will have another doctoral student conduct a thorough peer examination of raw data as well to assess whether or not the results are trustworthy.

The instruments used in this study will not be scored, but rather reviewed and analyzed for patterns and trends among the participants. Inter-rater reliability is not an issue as there is only one researcher for this inquiry.

In this survey, there are three types of questions. Demographic questions were created to describe information about participants in the study. Demographic questions included in the survey are as follows: "What

administrative certification do you hold? Choose as many as appropriate.", "How long have you been a special ed administrator?", and "What is your age range?". Multiple selection multiple-choice questions with an open-ended option are designed to gather information about decision making while still leaving available space to provide more detailed personal information if the participant would like to expound or if their answer was not provided. The multiple-choice questions include: "Why are you leaving your current position? Choose as many answers as appropriate.", "What incentives/strategies would have kept you in your role as a special ed administrator?". Thirdly, a series of open-ended questions provides the participant with an opportunity to provide any additional information they would like to share with the researcher. These incorporated: "What else would you like me to know that contributed to your leaving your role as a special ed administrator?", "Are there any other special ed administrators you think I should talk to? Do you have their contact information?", and "If you would be willing to further contribute to this significant research and participate in a brief interview, please provide your name, phone number and best time to contact you."

The survey questionnaire was developed based on the study's Research Questions. The researcher gathered input from peers via three individual peer reviews and an informal focus group. Field Testing was conducted by five practicing special education administrators after the focus group was completed. The peer review and the focus group

validated the questions and confirmed the survey correlation with the Research Questions. The focus group also provided insight into reasons why administrators would leave the position, and their suggestions became the multiple-choice responses on the survey. Suggestions for changes were solicited during these processes. Field testers indicated that the survey was brief and to the point, questions were clear and easily understandable. The field testers did not recommend changes to the content of the survey.

Since the time of the field testing, three new questions have been added: 1) "What else would you like me to know that contributed to your leaving your role as a special ed administrator?", 2) "Are there any other special education administrators you think I should talk to? Do you have their contact information?", and 3) "If you would be willing to further contribute to this significant research and participate in a brief interview, please provide your name, phone number and best time to contact you". These additional questions will allow the researcher to gather more insight from each individual participant about their own unique experiences as a special education administrator, why they decided to leave the position, and to potentially find new participants.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection began June 2016 and was completed June 2016. On June 2, 2016, electronic surveys generated on SurveyMonkey.com (Appendix B) were electronically mailed to 27 current or former special

education administrators in the sample population. Each of the special education administrators received a follow up email from the researcher on June 12, 2016 to inform them that the survey was sent to their email address, and they would be asked to complete it within one week. A third and final email was sent on June 23, 2016. When an individual was suggested for participation by a study participant, contact was made that day unless they were already included in the study sample. A cover letter was included describing the nature of the investigation (Appendix A). Participants were informed that their personal information would not be collected or maintained as part of the study. Personal information would be stored separately from coding and data analysis. No personal information or identifying school or partner district information would be included in any of the dissertation findings. Participants were asked to complete their surveys within one week. Special education administrators received a follow up reminder email within one week. A second follow up reminder email went out to the participant group two weeks after initial receipt of the study request. The response rate for the online survey was 70%. The response rate for the semi-structured interview was 58%.

The researcher contacted participants who indicated they would be willing to conduct a follow up interview. The interview protocol is included in Appendix C. An appointment was made for either a face-to-face interview or a telephone interview at each participant's choice and preferred location. Each interview was conducted either in person or on

the telephone. Each in-person interview was recorded with a recording device via an iPhone 5S and an application called Rev Voice Recorder which records and transcribes audio files. Each telephone interview was recorded via an application called Tape-a-Call, and recordings were sent to Rev transcription services. Field notes were taken by the researcher during the interviews as well.

It is important for this study to ascertain policies, practices, and/or incentives that would have been significant enough for former special education administrators to remain in the role, and also for current special education administrator to remain in their role. Public records and documents that have been collected and will be analyzed as part of this research study include Special School District of St. Louis County's 2012.17 Comprehensive School Improvement Plan Rolling Plan, MO-CASE Strategic Plan 2014.16, SSD Public Review Committee Executive Summary (2014), DESE Administrator Salary Grids, and DESE State Certification Records of Special Education Administrators.

Data Analysis

As there is no one "right way" to code textual data, Tesch (2013) recommends following a series of steps to help systematize the process. This includes reviewing the data as a whole, then reviewing one document initially to gather it's underlying meaning. She then recommends clustering topics together looking for outliers. Once this is completed, you begin to develop codes to see if any new categories surface. The researcher tries

to make connections between the groups to synthesize them. Once synthesized finally, you alphabetize them and begin a preliminary analysis of the data. The investigator recodes as needed. These steps were applied during this study.

The data were reported as raw data and percentages. Raw data were reported for the majority of questions; demographic data were reported in percentages by contributor responses. The data were displayed utilizing an affinity diagram chart and a consensogram graph (Shiple, 2009). The first interview was analyzed to gather preliminary connotations; the remaining 8 interviews were reviewed multiple times and analyzed to ascertain trends and patterns. Sticky notes and chart paper were used to create an affinity diagram, a quality tool used to identify common themes, among participant responses (Shiple, 2009). Codes were created from commonly identified themes on the affinity diagram. Survey Monkey calculations were used to identify the frequency and percentage of contributor responses. After initial codes were identified, the researcher reviewed the data multiple times, organizing and reorganizing the data via the affinity diagram to see if any new patterns emerged (Roberts, 2009).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the reflective process used by the researcher to realize self-impact on the study as a human instrument (Merriam, 2009). In this sense, the investigator confronts personal biases, assumptions,

experiences and worldview and how those features may influence the study. This allows the reader to understand the researcher's perspective on presented logic (Merriam, 2009). Reflexivity also intends to improve integrity, trustworthiness and objectivity of the study conducted by locating the researcher within the study. "...Objectivity is what makes the difference between valid scientific knowledge and other outcomes of human endeavors and mind" and "...various practices are used to support and produce this idea of objectivity" (Breuer, p.1).

This study was conducted by a former special education administrator with 15 years of experience in that role. Within the last year, the investigator left the role of special education administrator and returned to a special education teacher position due to a family health issue. Prior to the role of special education administrator, the researcher was a special education teacher for more than 5 years. The researcher has earned a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Special Education, a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership, an Educational Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership, and is pursuing a Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership. The researcher has educational certifications issued by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in the following areas: Elementary Education, Special Education (Cross-Categorical, Behavior Disorders, and Learning Disabilities), Special Education Administrator, Middle School Principal, High School Principal and Superintendent. The researcher conducted a

Superintendent's Internship in the area of Human Resources under the supervision of the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources.

The researcher and other special education administrators frequently discussed this topic informally over those 15 years, as it was observed as problematic for those in the field. The researcher participated in several Special School District county-wide multi-year committees relating to retention of special education staff at all levels. Committees included several topics within the human capital area of focus. The Administrator Salary Committee was responsible for clarifying the job role and responsibilities of the special education administrator and creating a salary scale and various salary ranges based on experience.

Recommendations from this committee were made to the SSD Board of Education. The Performance-Based Administrator Evaluation Committee was responsible for aligning the administrator evaluation tool with continuous improvement practices that follow the Baldrige Model. This committee made recommendations to the SSD Board of Education.

In addition to the committees involving an administrator focus, the researcher was part of the leadership team for several other human resources teams. The investigator was part of the Special School District county-wide Interview Team for fifteen years. In this capacity, the researcher was trained to conduct interview protocols for potential candidates for employment with SSD. The examiner also participated on the Performance-Based Teacher Evaluation Committee, currently called

Educator Evaluation System framework, for over ten years. Several revisions to the teacher evaluation tool were made over the years. The most recent revisions include aligning the current tool with state standards and expectations, reviewing and recommending the software package, developing a training plan for all special education administrators and teacher level staff, and participating in a pilot program for implementation. As a New Teacher Cohort Mentor, special education administrators met regularly with new teachers to address specific topics and provide guidance during their initial year with Special School District. Finally, the study investigator participated on the Professional Learning and Evaluation of Support Personnel Steering Committee where several goals were accomplished. The committee revised the support personnel interview process as well as the support staff evaluation tool. This committee created a training protocol for new support staff as well as identified ongoing professional development for experienced support staff.

The researcher developed many collegial relationships over the years that were invaluable in conducting this inquiry. Those established relationships had a positive impact on the frequency of study participation, the investigator believes. Those relationships are what helped build confidence with participants and also in the research being conducted. Relationships are based on trust and mutual respect, and this researcher believes that contributors were willing to divulge more personal and

private information about their experiences as a result of those relationships.

Assumptions that were made by the researcher prior conducting the study include access to former special education administrators through Special School District. Special School District did not provide any personal information about former employees and indicated there was none to access as exit interviews had not been conducted. Additionally, a second assumption made was that Special School District of Pemiscot County would be a willing participant considering the topic of the investigation. A final assumption the researcher made was about the potential salary gap that may surface between special education and general education leadership positions. This assumption was made based on prior personal conversations with current and former special education administrators during tenure in the position.

Limitations

One limitation of this inquiry is the non-response of the smaller school district in Pemiscot County. This first limitation leaves participants being employed by a single school district. A second limitation could be a lower than anticipated response rate due to the survey being delivered when some participants may already be on summer break. A potentially significant limitation could be the actual sample size may be lower than expected.

Chapter IV

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

As stated in Chapter I, this study examined the contributing influences that lead to turnover among special education administrators. As indicated in Chapter II, this problem has been discussed in the literature for decades with no materialized long-term solution evident, even when millions of federal dollars are focused on the effort. However, one key indicator was overlooked in the literature addressing the issue. There was no “voice” from the special education administrator. No one had spoken to them, and revealed what they had to say. I chose to work on this issue because I could see how it was directly impacting the school district that I worked for over time, and more importantly, the remaining individual special education administrators across St. Louis County. When I got into special education, as most educators would say, I wanted to change the world...one child at a time. I guess the difference now is that I want to change the world...one special education administrator at a time. I hope that this work is seen as a tool that can help make a difference in the turnover among special education administrators. Within these findings, one thing will be presented clearly. In order for the “iceberg” of special education administrator turnover to be “thawed”, we must look below the surface to see all that is there. The fundamental voice created within this work will help us to see what is below the surface.

The remaining portions of the chapter are organized in terms of the demographic information of study participants, and the three specific research questions presented in Chapter I. It leads with the dynamics and/or perceptions that contribute to special education administrator turnover. Next addressed are the dynamics and/or perceptions that keep special education administrators remaining in the role. The chapter then examines what incentives and strategies would allow districts to retain high quality special education administrators in their ranks. Finally, a comparison of data between participant groups is delineated.

Demographics

Data were gathered regarding demographic statistics from participants. The first question queries the educational certificate(s) held by participants, issued by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In the state of Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education issues certificates, rather than endorsements or another title, when an educator demonstrates they are highly qualified. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of participants reported holding solely a special education administrator certificate. Sixty-seven percent (67%) reported they hold special education administrator and at least one other certification. Thirty-three percent (33%) reported holding an elementary principal certification. Thirty-nine percent (39%) report holding middle school principal certification. In Missouri, middle school principal certification is an added certification only obtained after

elementary or high school certification is held. Fifty-six percent (56%) of respondents indicate holding high school principal certification. Additionally, 17% reported holding a superintendent certification. One participant chose to skip this question.

The second question asks for the participant's status as a special education administrator. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of participants indicated they are current special education administrators. Fifty-eight percent (58%) reported that they are a former special education administrator. Sixteen percent (16%) of respondents indicated they had been in their current district for more than five years. Twenty-one percent (21%) of those surveyed specified that they had returned to a teacher level position. Teacher level position includes special education teacher, speech/language pathologist, school psychologist, regional facilitator or other.

The next question posed to study participants was how long had they been in the role of special education administrator. Study participants did not indicate they had been in the position for more than 21 years. Sixteen percent (16%) of contributors indicated they had been a SEA for 0-5 years. Fifty-eight percent (58%) reported being a special education administrator for 6-10 years. Sixteen percent (16%) indicated they were special education administrators for 11-15 years, and 11% also reported being in the role for 16-20 years.

Question four, the final demographic question, asks participants to indicate their age range. Zero participants indicated ages 24-30. One participant (5%) indicated an age range of 31-35. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of participants indicated they were between ages 36-40, and an equal percentage reported being in the age range 41-50. Twenty-one percent (21%) reported being over 51. Table 4.0 captures demographic data of study participants.

Table 4.0

Demographic Data of Study Participants

Number of Special Education Administrators participating in study	37% Current SEAs	58% Previous SEAs
Certification(s) Held	28% SEA certification only	67% SEA and at least one other principal certification 17% superintendent certification
Years as Special Education Administrator	16% reported 0-5 years 0 reported 21 or more years	58% reported 6-10 years 16% reported 11-15 years 11% reported 16-20 years
Age Range	0 reported 24-30 years old 5% reported 31-35 years old	37% reported 36-40 years old 37% reported 41-50 years old 21% reported 51 years or more

Findings

When aggregated and analyzed, the survey and interview data revealed four major themes yielded by both current and former SEAs who

participated in the study. The responses to questions and contributor commentaries can be intertwined between and among the four themes that were exposed because they fulfill different facets of perception for different people. The investigator took the context of the interviews, studied and examined that data and enmeshed those reactions with the survey responses to extrapolate these findings. Although at different junctures of their careers, there was commonality among the special education administrators' views collectively. Patterns and trends were considered when analyzing the data. Common themes identified by both participant groups were shown to be the following: money, lack of support, stress level and politics. Table 4.1 summarizes the reasons why SEAs leave their positions. The analysis provides a rich description of dynamics and/or perceptions that contribute to special education administrator turnover. Then follows the dynamics and/or perceptions that keep special education administrators remaining in the role. Finally addressed, the chapter examines what incentives and strategies would allow districts to retain high quality special education administrators in their ranks.

Table 4.1

Why SEAs leave

Money	86% would leave for salary increase for new position	50% would accept general education assistant principal or principal position	29% long commute was a factor	42% working fewer days
Lack of Support	Only 26% reported support from direct supervisor	21 specific comments about lack of support from upper administration	Large caseloads and many school sites	Lack of equity among SEAs
Stress Level	21% indicated micro-managing supervisor	19 indicators of stress were reported	60% reported bullying by direct supervisor	23 specific comments about stress factors
Politics	Conflict with direct supervisor	Decisions made that were not "kid-centered"	Giving in to partner district demands	Negative relationships with partner district

As part of document analysis, the researcher identified key documents that would align with the research study being conducted. The researcher reviewed Special School District's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan/Rolling Plan dated 2012.2017. Where appropriate, the Rolling Plan Goals, Objectives and/or Strategies are mentioned in the correlating theme and/or subheading. The researcher also reviewed SSD's Public Review Committee Executive Summary dated July 2014. The PRC Executive Summary Recommendations do not apply directly to this study. However, there is a statement at the end of the summary states the following: "...A dedicated and highly trained SSD staff continues to provide a complete continuum of invaluable special services to tens of thousands

of students who represent approximately 15 percent of the school age population in St. Louis County” (p. 2). The investigator also reviewed SSD’s Board of Education Policies to determine which board policies would apply to this study. In particular, Board Policy GA: Personnel Management applies to this particular study. It was last updated by the Board of Education February, 2015. This particular board policy indicates that “...highly competent personnel...are essential to conducting a quality educational program” (p. 1). The researcher also examined the most current Missouri National Education Association salary comparison for the 2014-15 school year (MNEA, 2016). These guiding documents will be utilized to provide evidence throughout the Findings as appropriate.

DYNAMICS AND/OR PERCEPTIONS LEADING TO TURNOVER

Money

The most significant and universally reported theme had to do with money. Both current and former administrators consistently expressed this via the survey results and during interview sessions. Participants expressed frustration that salaries were not commensurate with partner district middle school principals; a position the SEA in St. Louis County, Missouri most closely aligns to according to the Administrative Salary Committee of Special School District (Meeks, 2011). Many expressed stronger emotions during the interview. However, some made their opinions quite powerfully known during the online survey. One current SEA contributor made the point that special education administrators are considerably underpaid

even when compared to assistant principal positions in the area. The “salary [is] not nearly comparable to even assistant principals in partner districts. It should not happen that the highest paid teachers are earning sometimes \$20,000 more than the admin[istrator] for fewer [work] days and no supervision”. This comment was shared via the online survey, but this person’s frustration is heard very distinctly. It echoes almost every other participants’ views when it comes to similar salary for the SEA position.

Another current SEA participant explicitly expressed a reason that may contribute to the “mass exodus” of special education administrators. “A gen ed elementary principal is making \$13-14,000 more a year with the same experience and education as me”. When asked how that made him feel, his response was, “It’s disheartening, frustrating...equating me to a principal but not giving me equal pay. I still don’t make what an elementary assistant principal was making a few years ago”. SEAs experience frustration with salary because a position considered to be subordinate is making significantly more around St. Louis County and neighboring counties. As the salary was a recurring theme with this interview participant, the researcher sensed some underlying resentment around salary and the plight of the SEA. He said, “I think things are headed in the right direction, but there’s still quite a ways to go”. “Special ed administrators in [St. Louis County] appear to be paid significantly less than similarly credentialed and experienced administrators in partner districts. This may be a factor that leads some sped administrators to leave”. As

patterns and trends within the data indicate this, too, he may be correct in his inference of the scenario.

A former SEA stated during an interview that she “was beyond frustrated” with the salary she received while in the SEA role. She indicated that “everyone all around me was making way more than I was. That was so unfair and incredibly frustrating...!” A current SEA stated something similar. He asserted, “If I were paid better, I would not [stressed the word not] be considering going back to a teacher level position” every year. He indicated he would ultimately make a more money if he made that decision because he would work fewer days per year.

Clearly, the special education administrators collectively, are bothered by the lack of equity in salary for their role, responsibilities and position. They indeed had much to say about money and salary. One person being interviewed claimed that “if there was respect for the role, then the special ed coordinators would be better compensated” for their hard work and dedication. He also stated that [another position specializing in one area of special education programming] “should not be compensated as an administrator because they do not have any administrator responsibilities. It shouldn’t be that way! There was a huge lack of respect shown. It was a turnoff for me. Special ed administrators are not valued.” Two people specifically stated that the role of the SEA is the “hardest job in [the county]”.

Another interviewee affirmed that special education administrator experience "...is highly valued by neighboring county districts, and they are willing to compensate for that experience". Other districts are certainly embracing SEAs joining their ranks. Sixty-five percent (65%) of study contributors accepted an administrator position in a partner district or neighboring county school district. SEAs, both current and former, are indicating they do not feel valued as a result of their lagging salary. Some reported that the salary for the position equates to respect for the role. Those that reported salary equals respect felt very strongly about that aspect of the SEA role. Respect for the role has a significant impact on their willingness to remain in the position despite any other positive dynamics they may perceive.

SSD's Board Policy GA addresses some of the financial concerns stated by participants. Policy GA Personnel Management indicates the following: "The Board recognizes that highly competent personnel...are essential to conducting a quality educational program" and within that context are committed to "Providing staff compensation and benefits sufficient to attract and retain highly qualified employees" (SSD BOE, p. 1). As of the 2014-15 school year, SSD's teachers are the 11th highest paid teachers in the state of Missouri (MNEA, 2016). One could deduce that administrator salaries correlate similarly to teacher salaries. Regrettably, that is not the case as reported by current SEAs who participated in this study.

Lack of Support

When considering the other themes, lack of support was the second most reported concern about the role and responsibilities of the SEA. This data was extrapolated by the use of an affinity diagram which was applied to the survey and interview data. Individual responses were recorded on sticky notes and then moved around to find commonalities. Individuals also made specific comments about the need for support while in the role of the SEA. When deconstructed, there were more than 21 specific comments indicating a lack of support from the upper management of the school district (i.e., direct supervisors, assistant superintendents or superintendent).

Lack of support was perceived by current and former SEAs in a variety of ways. Only 28% of participants identified that they felt supported by their direct supervisor. This leaves 72% of study contributors, by default, identifying a lack of support by their direct supervisor. On question six (6) which asks what would have kept SEAs in the role, 261% of responses had to do with additional supports that could be provided by the school district. Thirty-five percent (35%) indicated acknowledgement of a job well done as an incentive to keep them in the role. One person stated that SEAs should be recognized for what they do. She elaborated, "There was zero recognition for what we did. There were no kudos, there were no 'atta-boys', nothing...everybody needs a pat on the back once in a while". Twenty-two percent (22%) reported better relationships with

partner district administrators as an additional form of support. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of respondents indicated that a system to provide a balanced and equitable distribution of staff supervision was an incentive for them to stay. Thirty-two percent (32%) reported that a reduced caseload of less than 20 teachers would be an incentive for them to remain in their SEA role.

Current and former SEA study participants reported supervising many buildings. Some indicated as many as five or six buildings. One current SEA who was interviewed indicated that with such a high caseload, "...the job was really almost undoable with the amount of caseload". She added, "I had four buildings. I had 500 students. I had over 60 staff. There was no response from administration that worked above me to reduce that caseload and look at the equity" compared to other SEAs with fewer responsibilities. She reported that this was a repeated conversation for multiple years with no response. Another study participant stated, "I didn't feel effective at anything...everything felt surface level" because he was always "running around from one building to the next". One contributor who had multiple buildings to supervise said she "...learned to operate in crisis mode because that's how it was every day—constantly problem solving, always 'fixing it'...fixing things that other people screwed up". She said that fewer managerial responsibilities would have helped her be an instructional leader as opposed to being a manager.

Another participant indicated he “had to figure it out on his own. I had a complete and utter lack of support” while learning a new job working with two school systems that contradicted each other. Multiple people reported working 60-80 hours per week. Some reported performing two jobs, and others feel there are too many responsibilities for one person. A current SEA commented, “The amount of job duties and expectations continue to increase, but limited, if any, tasks or duties are removed. This makes it very challenging to be highly effective in the job”. Thirty-two percent (32%) of contributors indicated that additional SEAs in their district would be an incentive for them to stay in the SEA role. Participants loudly and clearly identified features of the SEA role that indicate a lack of support on the job.

One person who was interviewed said, “My direct supervisor was rarely on site and was rarely accessible for support. When support was sought, the response was never supportive. It was very accusatory. Why didn't you do...? Why didn't you do this? Why didn't your staff do this? That type of thing. There wasn't a relationship with my direct supervisor that would help support me during those times”. She added, “when I expressed my concerns, the lack of response from district leaders that were higher” went nowhere.

Another participant disclosed that support means many different things in educational leadership. She shared a scenario about lack of support from her direct supervisor that affected everyone she worked with

in her partner district from principals to teachers to programming for children.

...I think part of it, too, is not being present. I think that support happens a lot of ways in transparency, responsiveness, being on site, all of those pieces contribute to support. If you don't see your supervisor, if your supervisor doesn't respond to emails, those pieces contribute to [a lack of support] significantly. One, they don't have an understanding of what's going on in that environment. Then, when problems do arise, it's a lot harder to get to the root of the problem because they don't understand. I would say that most of the principals I worked with felt the same way. They got to the point of the lack of support was so significant that they didn't even want that person in their building because it did more harm than good. They relied on me as middle management and wanted me to be able to make those decisions with them. If we ever had barriers, that was an issue for them. I was on site and I was a part of their team, and I knew what we needed.

When lack of support is perceived to be dramatic, the commentaries that the SEAs make carry an emotional nuance, whether intentionally or unintentionally. They view this as an important element in their success as an SEA. Support comes in many forms and in many ways. The SEAs involved in this study plainly explain how the lack of support impacted their ability to do their jobs, their relationships with their colleagues, and their willingness to stay in that role.

The concern about being "stretched too thin" continues to be noted by current SEAs by commentaries indicating "nothing has been taken off the plate", people feel they are "doing two jobs", and they are still supervising too many buildings and too many staff to be effective at this point. As several current SEAs have reported, in order to seek respite from a job that is "undoable", they have opted to change partner districts to those smaller districts that have fewer students and teachers to supervise.

In SSD's Rolling Plan, there is a specific objective that targets the concerns of current and former SEAs about teacher supervision. Objective 8.3 states "Ensure organizational design supports efficient and appropriate deployment of the workforce" (p. 112). This particular objective is measured by baseline assessments, number of students served and teachers supervised per [SEA]. Strategy 8.3.2 delineates SSD will "Define and increase efficiency and effectiveness of [SEA] role" (p. 112).

Furthermore, SSD has a board policy that addresses some of the concerns of the SEA participants. Board Policy GA Personnel Management states that the Board is committed to "Assigning personnel to make the best use of individual strengths" (SSD BOE, p.1). Additionally, the Rolling Plan also indicates with Strategy 2.1.2, the Goal Champion will "Implement and manage a system to identify and resolve employee concerns" via the "SSD Improvement Exchange" (p. 39). Strategy 2.1.3, the Goal Champion will "Manage the staff recognition system" which is called "Cause for Applause" (p. 40). Through SSD's existing board policy and supporting actions and strategies indicated in the Rolling Plan, it appears that the SEA should see an increase in efficiency and effectiveness. The timeline for implementation of Strategy 8.3.2 is July 2016 with an anticipated completion date of June 30, 2017. As SSD utilizes a system of continuous improvement district-wide, it is likely that many of the correlating Action Steps will be accomplished by the completion dates.

SSD's Rolling Plan also has an objective targeting two-way communication as well. Objective 6.1 states SSD will "Provide systematic two-way communication processes in support of all stakeholder groups" (p. 64). Strategy 6.1.1 indicates SSD will "Implement and manage a systematic Voice of Customer process" (p. 64). This strategy is to begin July 1, 2016. Unfortunately, current and former SEAs are indicating their voice may have been heard, but it has not been responded to by SSD. There is another Goal Area, Goal Area 2, that states SSD will "Build an effective and supportive workforce environment that engages staff to achieve student success" and the strategy aligned with it, Strategy 2.1.4 states SSD will "Develop and manage strategies to promote employee engagement and satisfaction" (p. 41). Unfortunately, this goal and strategy appears to target teacher level staff and not current SEAs who feel unsatisfied. It remains unclear if this goal area will affect SEAs.

Stress Level

Current and former SEA participants indicated that high stress levels were the result of several factors. One could say all of the themes identified by participants could be issues that culminate in accumulating stress of the position. Lack of financial gain, despite having the necessary education, often multiple graduate degrees and highly qualified status, and along with a perceived lack of support from the district leadership were woven throughout the study results. Additional indicators of stress were reported via the online survey as well as through interviews. Twenty-

three (23) indicators of stressful situations were reported by study participants. Examples of those indicators from the online survey include not having “enough time to do the job”, the need for “better working conditions”, supervising “fewer than 20 teachers”, “equitable caseloads” for SEAs, having “additional SEAs in my district”, and “less micromanaging from my direct supervisor”. Some reported a consistent lack of support as a component of the stress they experienced. Stress appears to be a considerable factor when SEAs determine whether to remain in their position.

Within the online survey and during interviews, nineteen (19) additional comments were made about stress being a factor when considering leaving the role of the SEA; this equates to one comment per participant about stress related job factors. The following are commentaries from both current and former SEAs relating to stress as it influences their thinking about the SEA position. One participant reported “feeling like I’m on an island...out there all by myself”. She identified that being in the role of the SEA was difficult because you are not included in one building, but rather, you are spread out and “don’t have a home”. She stated that stress was a larger factor for her than salary. Being “[an SEA] is so much more stressful than assistant principal by comparison. People do not understand that. I can’t even tell begin to you.”

Some contributors felt like it is/was a challenge to meet the set forth expectations for a number of reasons. “The amount of job duties and

expectations continue to increase, but limited, if any, tasks or duties are removed. This makes it very challenging to be highly effective in the job". Another person indicated that she always wanted to do the best job she could, but she felt that "you can't effectively supervise staff when you have so many buildings...it's just not possible". This feeling of wanting to do a good job, but not feeling like she was doing a good job was a stressor that was a key factor in leaving her role as an SEA. She said "the stress level alone" made her want to quit. Another former SEA stated that the role is "not set up to succeed...the structure is awful". This was a stress factor for the SEA because she felt like she was never able to meet everyone's expectations because "they were all over the place".

Another participant supported similar thinking about meeting expectations. "We were not ever recognized for doing good work...we were definitely recognized when we screwed up!". She added, "When you get yelled at eight hours a day, five days a week..." it can take a toll on you. Frustration was expressed around being respectful to subordinates and realizing the demands placed on them. One person commented, and others echoed similarly, the upper administration needs to "figure out how to treat people with respect" because "they have certainly forgotten what it was like to be a teacher". One study contributor reported needing to take better care of herself because of the impact of the job. She left the SEA position in order to "decreas[e] stress level and promot[e] better mental health".

Processes and procedures appeared within the data with regularity. Special education, as a whole, requires additional processes and procedures that regular education staff do not have to follow. Additionally, in a large organization, it can be difficult to balance the need for processes and procedures with the additional workload those processes and procedures can create. "I loved the people I worked with. [Stress for me] was the processes and the procedures. I was still happy going to work". An additional contributor reported stress around procedures. This person specified there should be "fewer hoops to jump through to accomplish needed change or functions". A participant reported similar stressors around procedures for accessing support for his/her students and teachers. The member reported being "referred to a [specialist] who will ask me to complete a form to request supports only to tell me that those supports fall under a different person". This could be viewed as both a source of frustration and stress because it ultimately delays putting needed supports in place for the child.

One former SEA reported the size of the organization as a stressor because "the left hand [is] not always knowing what the right hand is doing". Another felt this added to the problem, "There's no consistency, there's no expectations..." as she said the direct supervisors "do their own thing". Another former SEA supported that notion as well, "SSD is so spread out that you don't know what everybody's doing". He expanded on that notion that the professional development team had one agenda, the

administration of the district with another agenda, and yet human resources has another agenda. A contributor who is a former SEA shared that navigating office space in a partner district building added pressure to his role. "Having to figure out if I will have an office space in a building or not...that should already be arranged by the director or the superintendent...I shouldn't have to fight for space to do my job". In isolation, these comments may appear to be benign. However, current and former SEAs frequently recounted similar stressors on the job.

Another stress factor that has contributed to SEA turnover surfaced when analyzing the data. The trend revealed that 27% of SEAs interviewed reported being bullied by their direct supervisor. Yet, another 36% observed bullying behavior by their immediate supervisor toward another SEA. One person acknowledged, "that was it, I was done" when she was bullied by her direct supervisor. She said it was "the straw that broke the camel's back" for her. Another member of the study indicated that she "disagreed philosophically" with her direct supervisor, "and I stood my ground all the time...it was difficult always having to keep defending why you're doing what you're doing when it's been working". She said it was exhausting to defend against her supervisor's "personal attacks". She said it was challenging to encounter, and something she never anticipated happening in her professional life. This contributor also indicated that she "felt so much negativity and stress from the other special ed coordinators...we had no support or training, and we were left to our own

devices, hoping that we were making the right choices" for kids. Ultimately, she left the school district because of the stress of the antagonistic relationship with her immediate supervisor.

When issues like workplace bullying surface, SEAs reported they did not always know what to do or how to handle the situation. One contributor interviewed shared, without the researcher inquiring, that she witnessed bullying happening to a colleague from a direct supervisor. She divulged that this "had become a pattern of behavior" for this supervisor as she had witnessed this multiple times before, and with other SEAs. She shared that she reported her observations to human resources "...and they did nothing about it". A study contributor also reported not feeling supported by central office leadership when she brought to them the "unrealistic expectations placed on [her] by [her] direct supervisor" among other issues she chose not to discuss during the interview. She felt like the leadership "could have been more supportive" of her. This participant ultimately left the SEA role because of the distress of this adversarial relationship.

Another person specified that she "experienced bullying in her previous position" as an SEA. She detailed, "I had all the classic signs of bullying: depression, a sense of hopelessness, insomnia, and high anxiety". She indicated she was encouraged by other administrators to report this to the Human Resources Department, but she concluded, "I don't feel like my complaints were taken seriously". Ultimately, all of the study

participants who reported they were bullied by their direct supervisor left their SEA position because of bullying behavior in the workplace.

SSD's Board Policy GA Personnel Management states that the Board is committed to "Striving for a safe and secure work environment that results in maximum staff performance and personal satisfaction" (SSD BOE, 2015). The staff members interviewed reported that themselves or other SEA colleagues left their positions due to not having a safe and secure work environment that resulted in maximum staff performance and satisfaction. There appears to be a disconnect between board policies in writing and in practice according to those who have taken their concerns to human resources. Additionally, SSD's Rolling Plan states that there is a strategy in place to address a safe climate. Strategy 2.1.1 states that the Goal Champion will "Promote initiatives that encourage staff well-being and a safe climate" (p. 38). Unfortunately, the action steps that correlate with this strategy targets accidents on the job and providing wellness opportunities to staff. This strategy does address providing increased communication about wellness opportunities for staff. However, it does not address the widespread concerns noted above where 63% of participants have directly observed or been the victim of workplace bullying.

Politics

The final theme that surfaced during data analysis was that of politics. When it comes to the role of the SEA working in the field of special education, study contributors said politics can have a dramatic influence

on decision making. It was reported that the work of the SEA is complicated by operating in a dual system involving two school districts with very specific, and often conflicting, expectations and requirements. This impacts not only the SEAs, but all of the staff that work with them. Oftentimes, relationships can be built to create a bridge to cross the political divides. However, politics can be a fluid and dynamic arrangement that they navigate every day on behalf of students with special needs, or it can be a desolate association where one is wedged in place, not feeling a part of either district.

Many respondents reported feeling like they were “operating in isolation”, as if “alone on an island”. They felt disconnected from central office, and yet, not connected to a building either. One person reported in his previous role as SEA, there was a “disconnect” between the two districts and indicated “it felt like a rivalry” because “the expectations didn’t match”, and he was “stuck in the middle”. Another participant echoed something similar, specifying there were “different philosophical mindsets” between the two districts he worked with in regard to “funding, staffing, all of it”. Several study members said that they were conflicted when responsibilities between the two districts they worked with did not match. They indicated that often, it was difficult to find a balance as a result. One participant indicated, “There should be a clearer partnership with the partner districts...so special ed administrators don’t feel like independent contractors floating around”. He expanded, “I felt like an

independent contractor...I wasn't a part of things; I felt like I was an outsider looking in". He added, "As time went on, I felt detached more and more" from having interactions with students. This person reported that relationships with students were assuredly what he was missing, and that was one factor that led to his leaving the SEA role.

A study contributor indicated that with upper management there was a "lack of understanding or connectedness with what's going on in the partner districts". One person stated, "It seemed like I was the only person who knew my job because my director did not...there were limited opportunities for [upper leadership] to come out and see what it looked like". He followed up on that comment and elaborated, "A lot of people think (stress on think) they know what it looks like, but they don't...and they're the ones making the decisions". Gathering feedback from staff members, and using it, was something that contributor felt like was missing. Another account supporting the lack of connectedness was that one SEA "felt like I needed to be in my buildings more, not at central office". He followed up with "there was pressure to be at CO, but I needed to be a part of things in my buildings".

When discussing dynamics that led to leaving the SEA role, one person stated that he began "questioning my sense of value". When he was asked to elaborate further, he detailed both lack of support and political statements, "value can be interpreted in many ways. If you feel like you're being heard, and at times I was heard, but action didn't always

happen after being heard". He said that there was "no follow through on anything discussed". He also indicated "not having a direct connection or purpose" was one way he questioned his sense of value and whether he should remain in the role or not. Several administrators interviewed either implicitly or explicitly stated that there was no respect for the role. It is possible people are feeling this way because the old adage rings true: actions speak louder than words.

One contributor shared on a scenario in her partner district. When discussing challenges or barriers in the role, she stated, "I just knew the barriers were so strong and there was no willingness to work on those barriers...I knew it was a decision that had to be made" about her decision to leave the position. She elaborated,

...I would almost use the term sabotage, where a leadership team would make a plan based on data, based on program eval[uations], based on a lot of factors. [We would] have a plan with very specific goals, action steps that people agreed upon. Then decisions would be made to sabotage that plan. Undermine the plan when the right people weren't at the table.

The same participant also stated that "a handful of teachers went to human resources" due to unprofessional interactions from the school leadership team. "People yelling at each other. Not assuming good will and participating in respectful conversations which is what people should do". Additionally, she said one of her principals told her that he would not work with her. Knowing the lack of support she had experienced before, she said, "literally I applied for a different job a week later". She talked with the superintendent of the partner district, and reportedly, his response

was, "What do you want me to do about that?" Knowing there was not support from the upper administration in either district, "I thought clearly, there's no support there. It was not going to be good for kids".

Conflict with a supervisor can happen in any position regardless of the amount of education people have or the field of employment. The role of the special education administrator has the additional complication of the politics involved with special education in general. One person stated that the SEA is "the toughest position" in St. Louis County, and others reiterated the sentiment. She expanded to add that "it's tough being middle management when upper management will cave" and counter a decision previously made by the SEA or give in to demands of angry parents in an attempt to diffuse a situation. Parents can be highly charged when there are problems with their child's educational plan in a partner district. If the SEA advocates for the child, but the parent believes something should look differently, sometimes they will go above the SEA's position for a distinctly different solution. One participant reported, "educational programming should not [be] dictated by one angry parent", but sometimes when calls are made to central office, those "kid-centered" decisions are lost in order to "make the problem go away or avoid due process" procedures.

The same could be argued about demanding partner districts. It is perceived by SEAs that some districts who "yell the loudest seem to get what they want". The insinuation made is that these partner districts are

provided with additional staff above and beyond what is needed for the number of students with special needs. Another could argue that it is because they are in a certain location within the county. One participant said specifically that “the worst thing” that ever happened “was to divide you by regions”. He expanded on this notion in regards to the political implications of the division of regions:

Here's North, here's South, and Central, you'll fit wherever you fit. You truly have the stereotype of, okay this is the African-American north county attitude and we're going to treat them one way. This is the south county attitude. As a north county guy, that's how I felt. That's how my team felt, and we played on that absolutely...when talking to the administration.

Clearly, there are no simple rules for how the politics play out.

Beliefs, principles and opinions play out in many more ways than there are partner districts, and that can lead to a delicate balance for an SEA. Leading with assertiveness can have costly effects. One participant noted that in a prior position, he had a “contentious situation with a parent...there were two opinions from two districts, from the cabinet level on down in each [district], two different [districts'] attorneys were involved”. He added that there were added pressures due to the amount of administrators and attorneys involved, therefore increasing the political presence of the situation. These kinds of hostile parent situations are all too familiar to special education administrators; at one time or another, they have experienced at least one litigious parent. It is easy to see how some SEAs could categorize those types of situations as the “stress level” theme. The situations described above are the reason why the children's teams

need to make data-based kid-centered decisions. The politics can be minimized when those practices are applied.

However, other politics may rise above the surface at any point. A participant raised a point about the education and knowledge base of partner district administrators in terms of special education issues. "The true negative to SSD [is] the fact most of these principals...have never had to deal with this or with special ed. They just go to that [SEA]. Everything goes to their [SEA], so they don't even know how to problem solve with it". This is why school districts outside of St. Louis County will compensate well for special education experience. They know how valuable it is to have someone who has been in this role. Within St. Louis County, it's almost as if the role has been taken for granted. One participant recalled a comment from a previous superintendent. He said, "'Either you want experience or you don't'...they used us as pawns to get their goals accomplished". This administrator seemed to be genuinely frustrated by the comment made by the superintendent. He said it was sad that no one listened.

It was stated that the SEA is the one responsible for training the partner district administrators. One participant who is a current SEA stated that he would have liked to provide more professional development for teachers and administrators than he was able to in a previous position. He thought this would eliminate some of the political impact in his former district. Another added comments about his experiences with providing professional development. "Those people aren't going to come sit and

listen. That was my biggest single fight". He recalled a time talking with supervisors after a training he had conducted. "I remember [direct supervisors] clapping and cheering. 'You really had a meeting and you talked about...' Yeah, you know how successful it was? It wasn't. They don't care". The cynicism was thick.

Sometimes the politics that come into play are more specifically dealing with "giving in to partner district demands". One former SEA reported that when it came to personnel decisions in his former district, that particular district would "get what they wanted" regardless of "whether it was good for kids". Sometimes, situations are spurred by the "mindset of a general ed teacher" and how they feel about "including special ed kids" in their classes. It can be an easier road for the principal to put that child in another class than it is to confront an issue with the teacher. Sometimes the road less traveled by makes all the difference (Frost, 1920).

Changing mindset can be a challenging political fight in a dual system. A former SEA reported that in her previous district, "they treated my staff like second class citizens". These mindsets can be difficult to deal with on top of the complexity of special education. Another former SEA provided an example of the politics at play in his former district, and the divide he encountered while working in this district that was brand new to him. His first interaction in the district involved meeting the principal's secretary at his new building. He was inquiring about his office space, and she was the person he was supposed to contact. He reported that the

secretary told him, "You get an office, but you have to supply it with your own material". He followed up, "Well, can I get a pen and a piece of paper?" The secretary's response to him was, "I don't know, we're going to have to ask".

The same participant added that he often did not agree with his partner district's policies and procedures. He went on further to add that his teachers "...were literally [housed] in a basement...they had a sewer pipe over my teachers' desks. It sprung a leak and four of my teachers' desks were covered in feces". The partner district building administration responded as if to say it was "no big deal. I'm like, What? What do you mean it's no big deal?" He definitively knew he had to leave when "it [the position] was changing me". He said he often felt like it was "us versus them", and "I was tired of it changing me as a person". As this researcher said, sometimes changing mindset can be a challenging political fight.

For some, the political fight can come between the SEA and all of the competing factors that come into play. An SEA tries to balance meeting the needs of their staff, meeting the expectations of both school districts they work with, as well as their direct supervisor. As one SEA reported that having frequent changes with direct supervisors can cause issues with consistency. One participant reported four changes in seven years while another reported four changes in five years. Lack of consistency can create problems with the partner district. Some direct supervisors provide "a ton of structure...but [another is] night and day

different style, which is great. Then you get someone else who's different from all of them". Sometimes, that direct supervisor can be the liaison at the district level to convey the political dynamics, so there is less of a struggle at the building level.

Gaining commitment from the partner district can be another challenging factor with all of the competing initiatives at work between two school districts. One former SEA indicated, "They're trying to do one thing, and they have no idea what's going on. The [partner] districts are all in different places. You can't have this one big component driving one way, and you've got [22] other components...it just didn't work. It became a nightmare". This person believed that "SSD need[ed] to dissolve and just become contractual". She indicated that SSD has "an immense amount of resources", but she felt like there were few benefits outside of accessing special education programs for students with more significant emotional/behavioral or intellectual challenges. Another described the scenario,

How do you sell your component district? When your teachers are being asked to sit in PLCs and do different things. Then you're asking them to do another PLC...write IEPs...do continuous classroom improvement...and bring you the data.... I got to the point where I couldn't look my teachers in the eye and believe what I was selling anymore.

Another former SEA reported feeling similarly. She indicated she "didn't necessarily believe in the things I was told to do". Others had similar stories.

The mission of SSD and the component district, while they may say it's the same, it's really not. I was the middle man. I was trying to pretty much convince [my former district]. They are great people, don't get me wrong.

This is what SSD wants, this is our process...our procedures, and we have to make it work.

She said she was mediating frequently due to these conflicting priorities. Sometimes the conflicts were student related, other times they were staff or parent related. In this environment, the participant reported that there were positive and collaborative relationships with the administrators and the district. She did not have to contend with the additional political dynamics of an adversarial partner district.

SSD's Rolling Plan (2016) has goal areas addressing the politics of the position. Strategy 8.3.1 is designed to implement a standard operational framework for partnership agreements between SSD and partner districts. When this researcher inquired about the partnership plan in previous school years, she was informed that there was nothing in writing, but there were informal agreements with some of the superintendents around the county. The researcher talked with her former partner district colleagues about the partnership plan. They were not aware of a partnership plan between the districts until it was mentioned at that time. This strategy has put a standard agreement in place with SSD and all 22 partner districts. "A partnership agreement was developed collaboratively with a group of...Superintendents/Assistant Superintendents across the county" (p. 112). The partnership agreement was then approved by the SSD Board of Education and the Governing Council in the spring of 2015. This partnership agreement was then shared with partner district superintendents. Baseline data was gathered on "partnership indicators"

during the 2015.16 school year, and subsequent areas for growth and actions will be developed (Rolling Plan, 2016).

Dynamics and/or Perceptions Affecting Retention

When aggregating and then disaggregating the data regarding the dynamics and/or perceptions about what keeps SEAs in their leadership roles, both current and former SEAs overwhelmingly reported that relationships were by far the most significant influence while remaining in their position. Table 4.2 briefly summarizes the value of relationships to current and former SEAs. Eighty-nine (89%) of participants indicated that the relationships they built in their schools was the leading motivation they stayed in the special education administrator role despite any unfavorable perceptions. Partner district administrators were another reason for 67% of SEAs to stay in the position. Falling in similar ranges were the teams the SEAs worked with (61%), positive feedback from partner district administrators (56%), and the SEAs in my area or region (56%). It is well-supported that relationships are a motivating factor for SEAs in St. Louis County. Special education administrators also indicate their feeling of having a positive impact on special education programming for children is another considerable indicator of remaining with their SEA responsibilities with 67% of respondents indicating such. Many current and former SEAs shared many reasons why they remained in their positions despite the challenges they encountered.

Table 4.2

Factors that kept SEAs in the role

Relationships
89% relationships they have built with others
67% stayed for partner district administrators
61% the team they worked with
56% positive feedback from partner district administrators
56% SEAs in my area or region
Politics
67% their positive impact on special education programming

One participant interviewed, who is a current SEA, spoke to me about her previous SEA position and partner district. She stated that her "...relationship with her [previous] partner district liaison was very strong". The liaison had a special education background, and that was helpful when trying to establish and/or change special education programming. This participant also indicated that she "...had strong relationships with the principals and the special ed staff in [her] buildings". She reported "...it was important for [this partner district] to make sure that all special ed staff felt like they were part of [that district]" and not in a dual system. She said that the SEAs in the district were very much a part of the administrative team just like the other principals. She stated that working in a district where this was the expectation from the superintendent on down made

working in the role much easier. She indicated that "...when the leadership changed within the district, relationships began to change" as well. She said that "[her] current partner district is student centered and based on relationships. As a result-we have amazing outcomes because of the work we are able to do as a team".

A past SEA who participated in an interview stated, "...I had a deep connection in [my partner district]. I had great relationships with the administrators, and I had a history in [my partner district]...I graduated from there, I taught there, I was [a special ed administrator] there...it was my whole world". She said these relationships and history in the district are what made her stay. The people in the district were "the most important reason" to her persisting. Another person from that same partner district also indicated that solid relationships with administrators and other educational staff are what kept her in the position despite any shortcomings she encountered. This appeared to be a consistent pattern, particularly of those participants who were former SEAs.

A former SEA identified many reasons for remaining in her role in the online survey. She felt like she had good working conditions and a supportive direct supervisor. She also relayed the importance of the relationships she had built: the team she worked with was important as well as the SEAs in her region/area. She, too, cited the importance of having a positive impact on special education programming. Another prior SEA who was interviewed reported that relationships were a strong influence.

He cited relationships with his partner district, being viewed as “being on their admin team”, and a high level of collaboration with his partner district administrators as how those relationships were valued. He stated that “...he enjoyed the leadership role” and the opportunity of “gaining experience” as important aspects. He also mentioned that having a “cohort of other [SEAs] who knew my job...that helped a lot with problem solving, collaboration, etc.”.

A current SEA who participated in an interview expressed a variety of motivations for remaining in his previous position as an SEA. He appreciated the “opportunity to impact the educational system” and “looking at data for patterns and trends on a larger scale”. He, too, articulated how relationships were a part of his decision making to remain in his previous position. He enjoyed “working with individual teachers to help them develop their skills and talents”. Problem solving was a big part of his role, and he appreciated “...the opportunity to work with parents and teams. That made me feel good about our [special education] programming”. A former SEA who was interviewed provided comparable experiences. She indicated that she “...felt like I was helping staff with relationships with students, and also providing tools for teachers to be successful in the classroom”.

These special education administrators have unmistakably voiced the most important inspiration for remaining in the demanding role of the SEA. Figure 4.0 illustrates the power of relationships for SEAs. Relationships

have been instrumental in keeping these special educators from leaving the position. Almost 100% of participants, whether current or former SEAs, acknowledge the significance that relationships play in this profession that intertwines the themes of money, lack of support, stress, and most considerably politics. Most were willing to endure because of positive relationships when these four sectors were creating chaos in their everyday worlds. However, when those relationships break down, people are far less willing to endure turmoil. Distinctly, relationships are particularly imperative when you are dealing with someone's child with special needs.

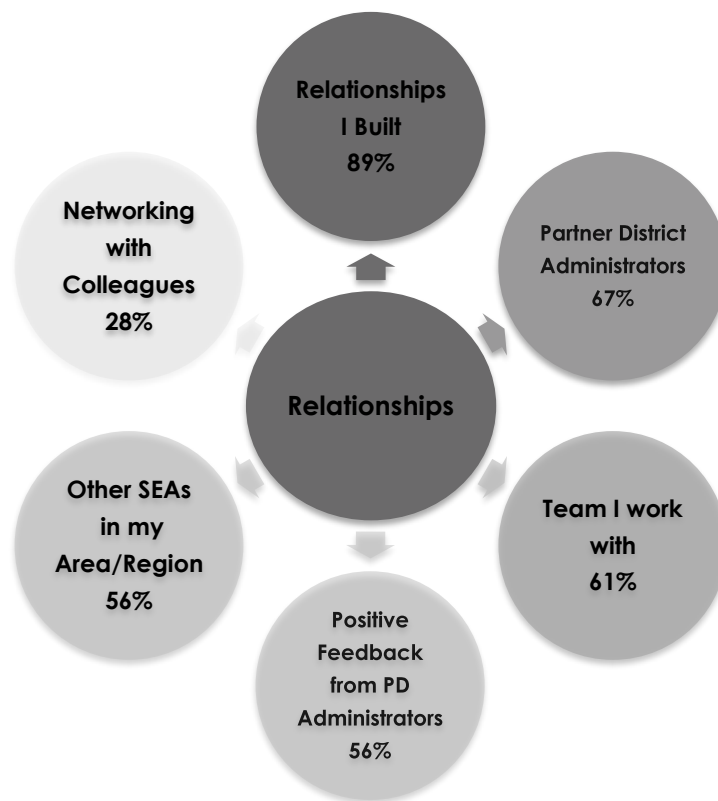


Figure 4.0 All SEAs reported most important factor for remaining in role was relationships

Incentives and Strategies to Keep High Quality SEAs

In order to keep current and future special education administrators in their roles for a longer tenure, school districts must identify what incentives their leadership team seeks and is motivated by. This study revealed a number of incentives and strategies that could be employed by any school district seeking to maintain any member of their administrator team. See Table 4.3 for incentives that are meaningful to SEAs. These incentives do not specifically apply to special education administrators. One study participant even indicated so. “While I am answering as a special education administrator, I think this can be translated to any admin[istrator] position”.

Table 4.3

Incentives to keep SEAs

Money	72% would stay for a salary increase	56% would stay for tuition reimbursement	45% would stay for bonus	44% would stay for flex-time
Lack of Support	44% would stay for positive feedback or recognition	33% would stay for balanced and equitable SEA caseloads	28% would stay for fewer than 20 teachers to supervise	28% would stay if there were adequate SEAs in their district
Stress Level	39% would stay for time to do job and better working conditions	33% report bullying by direct supervisor	31% indicated less micro-managing from supervisor	Support from upper administration
Benefits	9 choices for benefits 240% of responses were for benefits	56% would stay for tuition reimbursement	44% would stay for flex-time	39% would stay for 10-11-month contract and/or more vacation time

Data from the online survey revealed that the most significant incentive would be that of a salary increase (74%). Individuals repeatedly disclosed that a salary increase needed to occur for the position as a whole, not just themselves. One person provided insight, "I was an [SEA] for ten years. I loved my time with SSD. I loved working with the people at SSD. However, it was far from my home and I was way underpaid. Therefore, I moved to a district closer to my home for a promotion...making a much better salary" and doing the same job. One participant suggested matching the salary that the partner district you worked with, although he acknowledged that would be impractical with so many partner districts.

Another participant interviewed indicated that had the salary differential been rectified, she would have remained an SEA despite other concerns she expressed. A current SEA was asked about incentives or strategies that would keep him in his role as an SEA. His reply, "Certainly not the money!" with laughter afterward. He said if the pay were better, "it would keep me from looking at teacher level positions". He said he considered this because SEAs are "not compensated proportionately". One current SEA indicated that the "workload continues to increase for teachers and admin[istrators]. Nothing is ever taken off plates. I think this is why many leave special ed as a whole, admin[istrator] or teacher level". Reducing the workload of the SEA is one strong strategy that was reported by participants, both in the online survey and during interviews. One

former SEA suggested having one building to supervise for larger schools like high schools who have between 1,500-2,000 students. He suggested that approximately two middle schools would have similar numbers of students. He did clarify that this arrangement should still be considered an SEA position and not a principal position. A number of people provided similar suggestions to reduce the number of buildings, so that SEAs weren't "professional drivers" as one contributor described it. One person stated, "they could have thinned some things out and I could have done just as much" as a way to weed out non-essential tasks to allow him to focus on students and their needs.

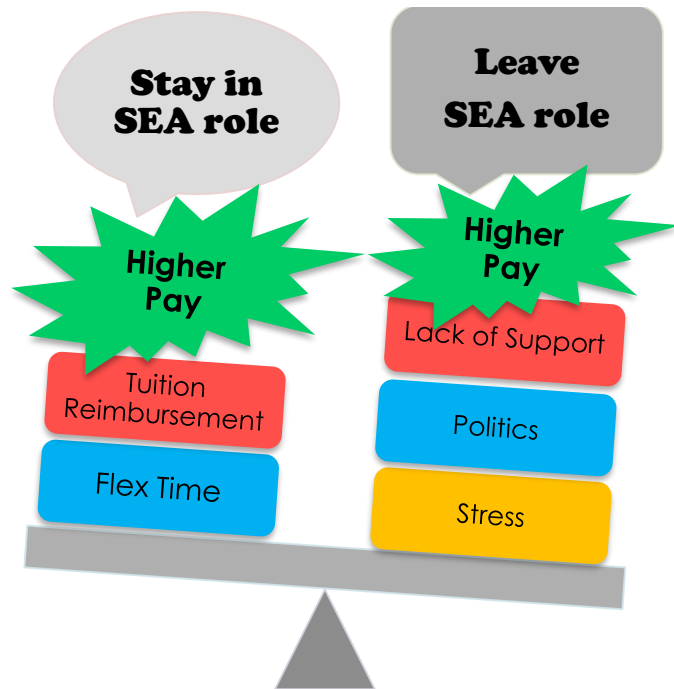
Many contributors also indicated benefits that would impact them financially would be reasons to stay. Included in those benefits would be tuition reimbursement (56%) and the opportunity to work "flex-time" (44%). An additional response (28%) reported a bonus for better than average performance for the SEA would be an incentive. Others indicated that changes to working conditions would keep them on board.

Changes in working conditions were suggested as a way to increase the tenure of the SEA. Some are subtle forms of change while others are readily visible. Acknowledgement for a job well done and creating a formula for a balanced and equitable caseload both yielded 33% of participant support in the survey. During the interviews, many people commented on needing acknowledgement for their good work because they have not or were not receiving recognition for work they

had done. One person commented, we need "...to make people feel good about things". Additional SEAs would help to reduce the workload and supervision responsibilities among the SEAs. This was reported as a possible incentive for 28% of survey participants along with reduced teacher supervision and working from home 1-3 times per month. Consistent expectations from direct supervisors was one way to keep SEAs in the role. This was reported by numerous participants during interviews. Another participant suggested countywide opportunities to collaborate would have contributed to his remaining.

Another former SEA suggested a similar opportunity. One participant interviewed suggested talking "with people in the job...listen to them, and make changes based on what they tell you". He followed up on that comment implying that if you're going to get feedback, do something with it. Another suggested a task force and a subsequent plan for changing and updating the role of the SEA. Even though it was not expressly stated, this researcher would suggest another incentive to improve SEA retention could be a more supportive upper administration when problems arise. SEAs do not feel as though their problems are heard or their recommendations for improvement are acted upon, and if this were changed, it well could impact those willing to remain in the SEA role. Any or all of these additional supports provided to SEAs could help keep them in the role of special education administrator. Figure 4.1 provides an illustration of the dynamics impacting SEA decision making.

Figure 4.1 A summary of dynamics that influence the decision to remain or leave the SEA role.



Comparison of Participant Groups

Current and former SEAs demonstrated similarities and differences when the online survey data was disaggregated. For a synopsis of participant comparison data, see Table 4.4. For both groups, the number one response for considering leaving or leaving the SEA role was for a salary increase. As stated throughout the Findings section, an increase in pay was the leading influence reported. Secondary responses for current SEAs indicate they would consider moving into a new SEA role or accepting a general education assistant principal or principal role. Former SEAs indicated they did leave their previous roles for a general education assistant principal or principal role and a reduced commute.

Table 4.4 Comparison of Current SEAs and Former SEAs

Why would you consider leaving the role of Special Education Administrator?	
Current SEA Response	Former SEA Response
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Salary Increase 2. New SEA role 3. Accept a General Education Assistant Principal/Principal role 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Salary Increase 2. Accept a General Education Assistant Principal/Principal role 3. Reduced commute
What incentives and/or strategies would keep you in your role as Special Education Administrator?	
Current SEA Response	Former SEA Response
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tuition Reimbursement 2. Salary increase 3. (TIE) Flex-time Promotion Formula for balanced caseload Less micromanaging from direct supervisor Acknowledgement for a job well done 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Salary Increase 2. (TIE) Acknowledgement for a job well done Networking with colleagues
What incentives and/or strategies kept you in your Special Education Administrator role?	
Current SEA Response	Former SEA Response
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationships I built 2. Team I work with 3. Positive impact on special education programming 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationships I built 2. Partner district administrators 3. (TIE) Positive impact on special education programming Positive feedback from partner district administrators

In terms of potential incentives and/or strategies that would keep or would have kept SEAs in their roles, there were varied responses. For current SEAs, tuition reimbursement was the most frequently reported response. The most frequently reported response for former SEAs was a salary increase; it was the second most recorded response for current SEAs. The third most documented answers for current SEAs resulted in a five-way tie. Not reported in any order are: flex-time, getting a promotion, creating a formula for a balanced and equitable caseload, less micro-managing from their direct supervisor and acknowledgement for a job well done. In second place for former SEAs, there was a tie including acknowledgement of a job well done and networking with colleagues.

When it came to the incentives and/or strategies that were effective at retaining SEAs, both current and former SEAs indicated that relationships they had built were the most valued motivation for staying. Current SEAs then responded with the team they worked with and the positive impact on special education programming, respectively. Former SEAs varied from current SEAs in that partner district administrators were significantly more important to them. The former SEAs, too, remained because of a positive influence on special education programming. However, for former SEAs, that was tied with positive feedback from their partner district administrators. It appears that former SEAs place a higher value on their relationships with partner district colleagues than do current SEAs.

Summary

This chapter was divided into sections. The first section provided demographic information regarding study participants. Informants provided information about themselves with regard to their background as an administrator. The second section provided rich descriptions of the dynamics and perceptions that contribute to special education administrator turnover. This section was also subdivided into theme areas that emerged from the data. Theme areas included money, lack of support, stress level and politics. In the third section, dynamics and perceptions of what keeps or would keep special education administrators remaining in the role is discussed. The fourth section examines incentives and strategies to increase retention of high quality special education administrators. Finally, a comparison of the data between current and former special education administrators is provided. The following chapter focuses on the researcher's interpretation of the study's findings.

Chapter V

EXPLANATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study sought to give a voice to the perceptions and motivations below the surface that contribute to special education administrator turnover. Additionally, this research intended to uncover the explanations why special education administrators remain in the roles despite the many challenges they might encounter. Finally, this work also intended to provide school districts with potential incentives and strategies that would encourage their special education leadership ranks to remain in their roles. These incentives and strategies were provided directly by the special education administrators who are in the ranks or have been in the role previously. This chapter provides an explanation of the findings that surfaced from the investigation. It provides a summary of the research study. Next, connections to the current literature surrounding special education leadership turnover. Furthermore, surprises that appeared within the study will be discussed. The chapter closes with implications of the study for educational practice and future research needs.

Overview of the Problem

The purpose of the research study was to have conversations with special education administrators to uncover their motivations for remaining in or leaving their role as a special education administrator. This study

intended to provide a voice to the motivations of why so many special education administrators leave their positions.

Purpose statement

Although the literature clearly identifies a shortage of special education administrators, the intent of this study is to determine what dynamics contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job or leaving the position, and to determine incentives that motivate special education administrators to remain in special education administration. Strategies may be identified to assist school districts in creating a plan of action to sustain the pipeline of special education administrators (Pounder et al., 2005; Sjostrom, 2009).

Research Questions

1. What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrator turnover?
2. What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrators remaining in special education leadership?
3. What incentives and strategies would allow school districts to retain former or current high quality special education administrators to remain in special education administration?

Methodology

A qualitative design was selected in order “to uncover and understand what lies behind [this] phenomenon about which little yet is

known" (Roberts, p. 143). The researcher seeks to understand the decisions below the surface of special education administrator turnover. An applied research method was utilized. Merriam specifies, "Applied research is undertaken to improve the quality of a particular discipline. Applied social science researchers...hope their work will be used by administrators and policymakers to improve the way things are done" (p. 3-4). This study hopes to generate potential solutions to a significant problem in the field of special education leadership by talking directly to special education administrators who are leaving these positions. A purely qualitative approach was selected to help the researcher gain an understanding of what thought process goes into a special education administrator's decision making when considering a job change, insight into the thought process of those special education administrators who leave their positions, and to assist in identifying what factors contribute to special education administrators' decisions to remain in this role. Qualitative data were gathered through an online survey and interviews of voluntary participants.

Major Findings

For both current and former special education administrators, there were certain parallel responses when related to the research questions. When posed with the question of "What dynamics impacted your decision to leave your SEA role?", the number one response for both groups was due to a salary increase. Following the trend, the second or third response for former and current SEAs, respectively, included accepting the role of a

general education assistant principal or principal. When considering the question "What influences contributed to you remaining in your SEA role?", the overwhelming response was relationships. Almost all respondents indicated this as a factor for remaining in the role. Another similarity was that both groups reported having a positive impact on special education programming as another reason to stay in the role. When asked the third research question "What incentives or strategies would keep or have kept you in your role as SEA?", the response of salary increase was first for former SEAs and second for current SEAs. Current SEAs reported that tuition reimbursement would be more important for them to remain in the role than a salary increase. The second most reported response for former SEAs yielded a tie between acknowledgement of a job well done and networking with colleagues. For current SEAs, the third most common response yielded a five-way tie which included flex-time, a promotion, creating a formula for a balanced and equitable caseload, less micro-managing from their direct supervisor and acknowledgement of a job well done. Clearly, survey items relating to money were the priority for both current and former special education administrators. Another important discovery was how significant relationships are to current and former special education administrators.

Findings related to the Literature

This study took the holes in the literature and filled them. At the same time, this exploration helped to give special education administrators

a voice to explain the dynamics below the surface of special education administrator turnover. Historically, there have been few investigations into the challenges of acquiring and retaining high quality special education leadership. There has been scarce research on factors that contribute to special education administrators remaining on the job as well. Bonnie Billingsley (2014) and her collaborators have written about recruitment and retention of special education administrators. They contend more research needs to be conducted to identify "...why individuals remain in (or leave) their jobs" (Billingsley et al., p. 94). Stephens et al., (2010) indicates a need to tap into successful special educators to determine what influences their decision to remain in special education leadership despite the numerous responsibilities they face. This research study addressed those two research teams' requests and collaborated with successful special education administrators to identify what influences their decisions to remain in the job. These special educators uncovered, collectively, the importance of relationships to the people drawn to this position. For both current and former special education administrators, relationships were the number one reported dynamic that kept them in their role as special education leaders despite all the other challenges they encounter daily.

It is well documented that many authors indicate a need for research to delve deeper and identify strategies to resolve the impasse that special education faces (Boscardin et al., 2010; Crockett, 2007;

Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2010; Tyler, Montrosse, Smith, 2012; Voltz et al., 2010; Washburn-Moses et al., 2008; Wheeler et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2011). Identification of strategies that can be replicated is one key to elimination of this shortage. This research identified key incentives and strategies provided directly by those in the field or who have left the field because incentives or strategies were not in place. This creates an opportunity for school districts to listen to what the SEAs are saying will keep them in the special education leadership role.

Themes that surfaced during the investigation included money, lack of support, stress level and politics. All four of these themes are consistent with the current and historical literature regarding special education administrator turnover. Key themes that emerge in the prior literature contributing to the administrator shortage in general include compensation, stress, time and work overload, politics of the position, and the ever changing role and increased expectations of educational leadership (COPSSSE, 2004; Crockett, 2007; Normore, 2006; Sjostrom, 2009; Wheeler et al., 2009). All of the additional literature themes stated were mentioned multiple times by study participants within the four major themes discussed in this research study. Many participants indicated the need for additional special education administrators, a smaller amount of teachers to supervise and fewer buildings to manage. It should be noted that these are not positions that are unfilled, but rather the participants

indicated specifically that they need more SEAs in their partner districts to counter the burden of increased work requirements.

Sjostrom argues similarly that when shortages occur and positions go unfilled, other special education administrators who are overtaxed must pick up those additional job responsibilities which adds to increased burden and program responsibility. The rationale provided when special education administrators leave the profession could all be directly or indirectly related to stress. Sjostrom identifies "intense stress" as a "reoccurring theme in the literature" (Sjostrom, p. 59). During this study, several contributors indicated that an increasing workload was problematic and made the job "undoable" or that it "wasn't a manageable position".

Additionally, many participants noted they did not feel "valued" by the organization. This surfaced in a variety of ways, but most significantly in the current salary structure that is in place for the position. Although there have been increases, participants report that they are still significantly underpaid compared to the general education partners. As early as 2001, a report from the United States General Accounting Office revealed that their "...studies of private and public sector organizations have shown, high-performing organizations focus on valuing and investing in their employees—human capital—and on aligning their 'people policies' to support organizational performance goals" (Mihm, p. 1). The interpretation of this article is that increasing salary is considered an investment in human

capital rather than a budgetary increase. This helps the employees feel like a valued part of the organization. As such, they are willing to do many more work tasks because they feel as though they are important to fulfilling the goals of the organization.

SMHC's (2009) stance is similar in that states and districts must have policies and practices that appeal to the best candidates in the field. Districts also must be willing to "reward those who are most successful" (p. 3). As indicated throughout this research, there are many types of incentives that will keep special education leaders in their roles, not just a salary schedule. Some incentives will come at a cost, while others are free and pose no impact to a school district. SMHC (2009) believes that excellence should be "recognized and rewarded generously" (p. 7). According to Missouri National Education Association website, Special School District teachers are the 11th highest paid teachers in the state of Missouri as of the 2014-15 school year. It would stand to reason that administrator salaries would be similarly correlated. However, that does not appear to be the case as SEAs are repeatedly claiming that salary is their major concern.

Special education administrators are simply asking for fair and equitable when it comes to the generosity of the organization. Fair and equitable caseloads, and also fair and equitable salaries. SMHC contends that school district "compensation systems should align with and reinforce...intrinsic motivation" (p. 16). They believe that compensation

systems should reward effectiveness, student performance, and argue that effective systems do this by recognizing and rewarding talent. As reported within the research findings, very few special education administrators feel intrinsically valued. This, however, can be changed. These strategies would help special education administrators feel like what they do is worth something; they are valued by and within their districts.

Surprises

There were two unexpected patterns within the research data. The first unexpected pattern was how many people valued the relationships of those they worked with. This researcher anticipated this was an important factor, but exactly how significant, was the surprise. Almost 100% of participants reported that the relationships they had built with their teachers, with their partner district administrators, and with parents were so important that they were the most important reason to persevere in the job.

The second unforeseen trend within the data was that of bullying behaviors exhibited by a direct supervisor. Sixty percent (60%) of those participating in the study interviews indicated they had been bullied or witnessed first-hand bullying of a colleague by a direct supervisor. Some reported bullying to human resources while others did not. Of those who reported to human resources, no SEAs felt as though their concerns were taken seriously. Of significant note, all participants who were the victims of

bullying by a direct supervisor ultimately decided to leave their positions as special education administrators as a direct result of their experience.

Implications for action

“Well-designed human capital management systems should continually improve the workforce by hiring those with the greatest potential to be effective, providing career-long professional development, rewarding effective performers, improving average performers, and improving (or ultimately removing) low performers” (p. 6). This study can be a resource for school districts who have steady turnover among their special education leadership team. The tools provided in the appendix may be helpful to general education leadership as well, as several current general education administrator participants added these reflections could be made for their current school districts. The data identified the motivations why special education administrators remain in their roles, and thus, school districts must ensure that relationships are facilitated early in order to keep those special education leaders.

This study also identified the reasons why special educators leave leadership roles. Research data can provide school districts with gaps that exist in their policies and procedures for retention of high quality administrators. Additional incentives and strategies can also assist to strengthen their retention practices. School districts can furthermore utilize this information to make sure their practices align with what research indicates, as this particular research has come directly from current and

former special education administrators. These incentives and strategies may have a positive effect on the school district's retention rates among their leadership team.

It is also imperative that new special education leaders have access to professional development that helps them build positive relationships, particularly when the politics of education in a partner district are challenging. The current and former SEAs reported at times, it was challenging to build relationships. Particularly, when the partner district administrators did not have a similar mindset toward education or special education.

Recommendations for further research

In order to determine if these incentives and strategies will generalize to all educational leadership positions, this study should be replicated with general education administrators to determine if the same dynamics and perceptions are part of the thought process when making decisions about leaving a leadership role. To determine if this study is reliable and will transfer to school districts outside of St. Louis County, this study should be replicated with other general education districts who have their own special education programs or with school districts who are part of a cooperative that provides special education services. The Council of Administrators of Special Education could conduct this study with all of its member participants to determine generalizability around the United States. Additionally, further investigation into the frequency of workplace

bullying by direct supervisors should be an additional area to pursue, as it appears to have great impact on decisions leading to leaving the role of the special education administrator.

Concluding remarks

Special education administration is at a crossroads. Not only are we at the intersection of special education, general education, and educational administration (Lashley et al., 2003), but we are also at the intersection of highly qualified educators, increasing rigor and standards, and specialized instruction (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Voltz et al., 2010). This study gave a voice to the perceptions and motivations below the surface that contribute to special education administrator turnover. Additionally, this research uncovered the explanations why special education administrators remain in the roles despite the many challenges they encounter every day. Finally, this work may also provide school districts with potential incentives and strategies that would encourage members of their special education leadership teams to remain in their roles. These incentives and strategies carry added prominence because they were provided directly by the special education administrators who are in the ranks or have been in the role previously.

As special education administrators regularly leave their roles as leaders of special education programming, it is important that school districts make every effort to diminish this turnover. Odden's argument that school districts need to be strategic about their human capital is of vital importance in the arena of special education administration. In order to create a strategic plan, school districts must look below the surface of their

own special education administrator turnover. They must see what is below the iceberg in order to melt it away, and retain their best special education leaders. It is vital that students with special needs be provided with the best special education services possible in order to close their learning gaps (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett, 2007; Sjostrom, 2009; Voltz et al., 2010). "The importance of addressing recruitment and retention of both teachers and administrators is essential to the opportunities of students to achieve critical educational outcomes" (Billingsley et. al., p. 107).

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Appendix A

Letter of Electronic Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT – PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study about special education administration turnover. Your knowledge, expertise and perceptions are highly valued. Amy Meeks, a doctoral student in the Division of Educational Leadership at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and former special education administrator, is conducting this study. You have been asked to participate because you are either a current or former special education administrator, and you can provide valuable perceptions for this study. We ask that you read this information and ask any questions you may have before proceeding.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. This study is not affiliated with Special School District of St. Louis County. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. I sincerely thank you for considering your crucial role in this research. Without your collaboration, this work cannot be realized.

Continuing with this survey implies informed and free consent to be a participant in the study.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What procedures are involved?

If you agree to be included in this research, you will be invited to take a short survey asking demographic questions as well as questions regarding your individual decision making about leaving or remaining in your role as a special education administrator. The survey normally takes less than 10 minutes to complete. There is also an option to volunteer for an interview with the researcher. Again, your participation is completely voluntary, you may decline to answer any question(s), and you are free to withdraw at any time.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

The surveys are anonymous and conducted through an online survey tool. However, any identifiable information reported by participants will be protected. Names of individuals, schools and districts will be given a code. Any comments with personal references and school and/or district names will be changed for final documents to ensure participant confidentiality. During the interviews, pseudonyms will be used, and no real names of participants, schools and/or districts will be used in any published documents or presentations. Access to raw data is limited to the sole individual researcher. After the study, the data will be destroyed.

What's the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to explore three questions:

- 1 | What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrator turnover?
- 2 | What dynamics and/or perceptions contribute to special education administrators remaining in special education leadership?
- 3 | What incentives or strategies would allow school districts to retain former or current high quality special education administrators to remain in special education administration?

Your insights, observations and opinions will help guide the future of special education administration.

What are the potential risks and/or benefits to taking part in this research?

The sole purpose of the surveys is to solicit your ideas and impressions of special education administration turnover. Risks to you are negligible. For example, a question may cause you to recollect an unpleasant incident that occurred in a field setting. No other risks are envisioned.

There are no direct benefits for your participation in this study. However, you may help improve the quality of incentives and strategies used to retain special education administrators. Your participation in this research will help the researcher identify perceptions of special education administrators as they make decisions about leaving or remaining in their positions. This research can help inform the national dialogue and contribute to the body of literature about special education administrator turnover.

There will be no financial compensation or academic credit offered for participation in the survey.

Can I withdraw from the study?

You can choose whether to participate in this research study or not. You may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

What if I have other questions?

You may contact Amy Meeks by phone at (314) 583.4415 or through e-mail to ameeks@umsl.edu.

You may also contact the Chair of the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (314) 516-5897.

Remember:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship to the University of Missouri. This study is not affiliated with Special School District of St. Louis County. If you choose to participate, you may rescind the decision at any time.

Continuing with this survey implies informed and free consent to be a participant in the study.

Appendix B
Electronic Survey

Electronic Survey

This study seeks to uncover information about the turnover in the field of special education administration. Completion of this survey is voluntary. By completing this survey, you are giving your consent to participate in this study. Your answers will be kept anonymous and confidential. Completing this survey is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time. Thank you for participating in this research study.

1. What administrative certification do you hold? Choose as many as appropriate.

- special education administrator/director only
- special education administrator/director
- elementary principal
- middle school principal
- high school principal
- superintendent
- other

2. How long have you been a special ed administrator?

- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 21 + years

3. What is your age range?

- 24-30 years old
- 31-35 years old
- 36-40 years old
- 41-50 years old
- 51 + years old

4. Why did you/are you leaving your current (or previous) position? Choose as many answers as appropriate.

- did not get new role/promotion within SSD
- accepting a new special education administrator role
- accepting a general ed assistant principal/principal position
- accepting a director of special services/special education position
- accepting an assistant superintendent position
- family factors
- 10 or 11 month contract
- more vacation time
- reduced commute
- salary increase (\$0-10,000)
- salary increase (\$11,000-15,000)
- salary increase (\$16,000-25,000)
- salary increase (\$25,000 +)
- other

5. What incentives/strategies would keep/have kept you in your role as a special ed administrator?

- Better working conditions
- Higher salary
- Promotion
- More/Better benefits
- More Vacation time
- 10 or 11 month contract
- Access to Mobile technology
- Professional Development
- Acknowledgement of a job well done
- Assignment with reduced commute
- Assignment with reduced caseload
- Other

6. What else would you like me to understand about you leaving/wanting to leave your role as a special ed administrator?

7. Are there any other special ed administrators you think I should talk to? Do you have their contact information?

8. If you would be willing to further contribute to this important research and participate in a brief interview, please provide your name, phone number or email address and best time to contact you. I thank you for your insights, perceptions and most importantly, your time.

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Thank you for your collaboration and participation in this interview. Your involvement will help me develop an understanding of the subtleties that lead to turnover among special education administrators. Because the survey you previously completed was anonymous, some of the questions I ask you may be repeated.

1. What administrative certification(s) do you hold?

special education administrator/director only	elementary principal
special education administrator/director	middle school principal
superintendent	high school principal
other	

2. How long (have you been) were you a special education administrator?

0-5 years	11-15 years	21 + years
6-10 years	16-20 years	

3. Are you a current or former special education administrator?

Current
Former

4. Were you a special ed teacher prior to becoming a special education administrator?

Y	N	Other
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5. (If former SEA: When you stayed in that position,) What influences contributed to you remaining in your special education administrator role?

Gaining experience
Finishing my Master's Degree
Professional development
Loved the job
Loved the people I worked with
I made a difference

6. What dynamics impacted your decision to leave your role as a special education administrator?

got new role/promotion within SSD
did not get new role/promotion within SSD
accepting a general ed assistant principal/principal position
accepting a director of special services/special education position
accepting an assistant superintendent position
family factors
10 or 11-month contract
more vacation time
reduced commute
salary increase (\$0-10,000)
salary increase (\$11,000-15,000)
salary increase (\$16,000-25,000)
salary increase (\$26,000 +)
stress of the position
needed additional special education administrators in my area
other

(notes continued on next page)

6. continued

(Optional) What was it like for you when you first considered leaving your previous SEA position?

7. What challenges/barriers did you encounter as SEA that made you consider leaving (your previous position)?

Did any of those challenges/barriers play into your decision to leave?

(notes continued on next page)

8. What incentives/strategies would keep (OR have kept) you in your role as a special education administrator?

- Better working conditions
- Higher salary
- Bonus for supervising more than average staff
- Bonus for higher performance than average special ed admin
- Promotion
- More/Better benefits
- Tuition Reimbursement
- Flex time
- Work from home 1-3 days/month
- More Vacation time
- 10 or 11-month contract
- Access to Mobile technology
- Professional Development
- Acknowledgement of a job well done
- Better partner district relationships
- Positive feedback from my partner district admin about my work as instructional leader
- A way for parents/partner district staff to recognize my work as instructional leader
- Assignment with smaller caseload (less than 20 teachers)
- Formula for creating more balanced/equitable caseload around county
- Less turnover among teacher staff
- Less micromanaging from direct supervisor
- Time to do the job
- Additional special ed administrators in my district
- Networking with colleagues
- Assignment with reduced commute
- Support from Central Office
- Other

9. What suggestions would you have that could improve the role or working conditions of the special education administrator so more people would be willing to remain in the position?

(notes continued on next page)

(Optional) Suppose one of your teachers asks you about becoming a SEA. What would you tell them?

10. Are there any other special ed administrators who have left their positions you think I should talk to? Do you have their contact information (email/phone)?

Name	Email	Phone

11. What other insights/perceptions would you like to share with me?