

## Abstract

Recently, the largest professional organization for special educators in the United States, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), initiated a nationwide survey of special education teaching conditions. This comprehensive initiative seeks to examine factors, such as recruitment, retention, attrition, and working conditions, which contribute to chronic shortages of special educators throughout the country. In response to CEC's request for input, the Hawai'i Federation of CEC conducted a survey of special education teachers, on Oahu, in the spring of 1998. This article summarizes results of the Hawai'i survey, identifies areas of concern to special education teachers, and provides recommendations for improving special educators' working conditions.

## Working Conditions of Special Educators in Hawai'i

Demand for certified special education teachers has increased nationwide due to three major trends. First, the number of special education graduates from teacher education programs has decreased. Second, many teachers have exited the field of special education in favor of general education teaching positions and other jobs. Third, the overall population of youth who require special education services has increased. Studies have reported up to 37% reductions in the number of special education teacher graduates from previous years. In addition, teacher attrition in some locales exceeds 30% annually. Moreover, attrition is generally higher among special educators than general educators. Finally, the number of students and youth who receive special education has increased, in some instances, by more than 4% in one year (Boe, Bobbit, & Cook, 1997; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; National Center for Education Statistics, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

Research studies suggest that a number of variables explain why graduates of special education teacher training programs do not assume special education teaching positions, and why those that do tend to leave the field

after relatively short periods of time. Numerous studies identify four work-related variables as major deterrents to teaching in special education. These deterrents include excessive paperwork, high caseloads, too many meetings, and excessive job stress (Billingsley, 1993; McManus & Kauffman, 1991; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Schnorr,

1995). Studies, which investigated attitudes of special education teachers toward principals and other administrators, reveal that special education teachers are concerned about principals' lack of understanding about what teachers do, limited administrative assistance with problems, administrative reluctance to involve teachers in programmatic decisions, a sense of being managed from a distance, and lack of feedback and recognition from supervisors (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten, Gillman, Morvant, & Billingsley, 1995;

McManus & Kauffman, 1991).

In 1998, the CEC initiated a comprehensive investigation of special educators' working conditions because of chronic national shortages, poor retention, and high attrition of special education teachers throughout the United States.

In response to this national initiative, the Hawai'i Federation of CEC conducted a survey of special education teachers, on Oahu, in the spring of 1998. The purposes of this survey were: (a) to identify variables specific to the State of Hawai'i related to recruitment, retention, and attrition, and (b) to contribute to the national database that addresses relations between working conditions, recruitment, retention and attrition in special education. The authors hope that policy makers will utilize data from the national database to implement policies that will address these challenging issues at local, state, and national levels.

## Working Conditions of Special Educators in Hawai'i

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## Method

The authors used a convenience sample of special education teachers who responded in writing to a printed survey about working conditions of special educators in Hawai'i. We delivered the survey to special education teachers at elementary and secondary schools on Oahu. Most of the teachers had formal or informal connections to our special education teaching programs, in the Department of Special Education, at the University of Hawai'i. We assured teachers that their identities would remain anonymous and that information would remain confidential (i.e., that personal identities would not be linked to survey responses).

## Respondents

One hundred thirty-six special educators on Oahu responded to the survey. Over four-fifths ( $n = 112$ ) of the teachers who responded were females. Most respondents spent their entire teaching careers in special education. Their teaching experience ranged from one year to over 20 years. About one-third of the respondents taught for less than four years; one-fourth of them taught special education students for over 19 years. Over 60% of the respondents possessed post-BA certificates or Master's level degrees; 83 percent were certified in special education.

Respondents included nearly equivalent numbers of special education teachers from elementary (Pre-K to 6 grades) and secondary (7 to 12 grades) schools. Although many respondents worked with students across disability categories, 70 percent worked with students with mild to moderate disabilities. Interestingly, 70 percent of the respondents also indicated that they taught in self-contained placements.

## Survey Instrument

Although the survey instrument included demographic and other items, we will limit our description in this article to the two most informative sections of the survey. The first section included 20 items that listed commonly cited problems from the literature on special education working conditions. Respondents used a 5-point Likert rating scale to indicate their perception of the serious-

ness of each condition or problem, ranging from 5 for *serious problem*, to 1 for *not a problem*.

The 20 survey items represented problematic issues that the national CEC organization identified, including: (a) perceived status of special education; (b) nature of the students and their disabilities; (c) time required for related paper work, instruction, and noninstructional activities; (d) caseload, class sizes, resources, and facilities; (e) working relationships with general education colleagues, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, and interagency personnel; and (f) preparation, training, and professional growth opportunities. In the second section of the survey, respondents wrote open-ended, narrative comments to document their concerns about working conditions in the field of special education.

**Table 1**  
Teacher Ratings of Problematic Working Conditions in Order of Seriousness

	Condition	Mean	SD
1.	Too much paperwork.	4.39	.96
2.	Too many regulations and guidelines.	4.16	1.13
3.	Requires too much noninstructional time; too many meetings, workshops, conferences.	3.91	1.26
4.	Caseload is too large.	3.75	1.27
5.	Behavior problems of students.	3.70	1.25
6.	Lack of funds for materials, resources.	3.63	1.28
7.	Lack of adequate facilities.	3.63	1.31
8.	Low status of special education.	3.56	1.29
9.	Class size is too large.	3.55	1.33
10.	Coordination of interagency/related services and personnel.	3.51	1.22
11.	Lack of interagency/related services and support.	3.28	1.26
12.	Lack of district level support.	3.21	1.24
13.	Lack of professional growth opportunities.	3.12	2.07
14.	Lack of school level administrative support.	3.02	1.36
15.	Disability of students.	2.94	1.33
16.	Conflicts with general educators.	2.89	1.27
17.	Lack of preparation or training.	2.69	1.33
18.	Lack of educational aide/paraprofessional support.	2.68	1.32
19.	Conflicts with parents.	2.39	1.17
20.	Conflicts with educational aide paraprofessional.	2.03	1.23



## Data Analysis

We used simple descriptive statistics (i.e., item means and standard deviations) to quantify responses to the 20 survey items. In addition, we conducted content analysis of respondents' narrative comments to identify major themes that characterized respondents' concerns about their own working conditions.

## Results

### Likert-Scale Ratings of the Seriousness of Problematic Working Conditions

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for each of the 20 survey items. The five most serious problematic working conditions, as indicated by respondents who used the 5-point Likert scale with ratings of 5 representing *serious problem* through ratings of 1 representing *not a problem*, are listed here, and in Table 1, in order of magnitude with corresponding item means: (a) *too much paperwork*,  $M = 4.39$ ; (b) *too many regulations and guidelines*,  $M = 4.16$ ; (c) *too much noninstructional time*,  $M = 3.91$ ; (d) *large caseload*,  $M = 3.75$ ; and (e) *students' behavior problems*,  $M = 3.70$ . The two working conditions that respondents indicated were least problematic included: (a) *conflicts with educational aides or paraprofessionals*,  $M = 3.75$ ; and (b) *conflicts with parents*,  $M = 2.39$ . Notably, the two smallest standard deviations among the 20 survey items were obtained for *too much paperwork* ( $SD = 0.96$ ) and *too many regulations and guidelines*, ( $SD = 1.13$ ). Thus, respondents consistently agreed that these two items were the most serious of the problematic working conditions. Similarly, respondents consistently agreed on the two least problematic working conditions, as evidenced by the SD values obtained for: (a) *conflicts with educational aides or paraprofessionals* ( $SD = 1.23$ ; the fifth smallest SD among the 20 survey items); and (b) *conflicts with parents* ( $SD = 1.17$ ; the third smallest SD among the 20 survey items).

### Narrative Comments

We identified seven major themes through analysis of respondents' narrative comments. In order of most frequent to least frequent appearance, these themes included respondent concerns about: (a) the Individuals with Dis-

abilities Education Act (IDEA), state regulations and guidelines related to IDEA, paperwork, meetings, and teaching responsibilities; (b) student issues and instructional concerns; (c) training, certification, and qualifications for special educators; (d) mental health issues; (e) support and availability of resources; (f) economic issues, pay, and compensation; and (g) low status of special education.

Respondents mentioned frequently that IDEA revisions caused increased paperwork and responsibilities. Most respondents indicated that federal law and state guidelines require teachers to spend excessive time on paperwork, IEPs, meetings, and noninstructional tasks. Many respondents indicated that guidelines and procedures continue to be unclear and ill-conceived, particularly as they exist in Hawai'i. One teacher suggested that the people who actually do the paperwork should be responsible for designing the forms.

An overwhelming number of written comments reflected teachers' alarm and dismay at sacrificing instructional time to comply with required paperwork. Correspondingly, many respondents indicated that students do not receive proper services because special educators are too busy completing paperwork, general educators don't want students with disabilities in their classes, and counselors and related service providers fail to provide appropriate services. Several teachers indicated that it is nearly impossible to serve students with mixed and diverse disabilities in the same class, and a few teachers wrote that cross-categorical classes do not benefit students. One teacher proposed 'push-in' rather than 'pull-out' services to support students in inclusive settings.

Many respondents considered inservice training for special educators to be inadequate and cited the need for more and better training. They felt that some of their peers are ill-equipped to teach in special education classes and noted that special education teachers must be more qualified and receive more training than their general education counterparts.

Many teachers expressed frustrations with securing mental health services for their students. In some cases, school counselors did not serve students with disabilities, and referrals to mental health agencies did not result in service provision, either due to agency backlog or systemic problems. One teacher emphasized the need for adequate residential facilities, and another proposed that



*Zachary and Ms Kubo counting the days in the calendar*



*Educational Assistant Beverly Chaves and students Joann and Leanna*



*Student teacher Marie Kubo and Pre-K children  
at Kailua Elementary School on Oahu*

each school should have a school psychologist. One respondent expressed frustration with having to fight for services that students needed.

Many respondents indicated they were frustrated with lack of support from school administrators, district personnel, and state personnel. Several teachers expressed frustration with interdepartmental and intradepartmental problems and ill feelings among their general education peers. Some participants expressed a need for parental support and cooperation; others suggested that the teachers' union and State Board of Education have addressed inadequately special educators' concerns.

Several respondents believed that special educators are compensated insufficiently, especially for additional responsibilities that require non-school time and for out-of-pocket expenses. A few respondents noted that teacher salaries in Hawai'i compare unfavorably with teacher salaries in other states. One teacher noted the flight of special educators into general education programs and recommended a pay differential of \$5000 to lure qualified, certified teachers into the field.

A final area of concern for many respondents was the perceived low status of special education. Some respondents opined that our society and schools treat students with special needs as "throw away" children. A few teachers commented that special education is perceived to be "easy" and that this perception lowers teachers' and students' expectations. They indicated that the low status attributed to special education by school administrators and general educators prevents students with disabilities from enjoying more inclusive or integrated opportunities in schools. Another teacher discussed the low morale of many special educators who feel they are not valued and who consider themselves to be just as alienated from the system as are their students.

## Discussion

The findings of this survey suggest that several important working conditions merit corrective action in order to improve working conditions for special education teachers on Oahu. Three of the four top concerns expressed by special education respondents in this survey matched concerns identified frequently in other state and national studies of working conditions in special education. These major "matching" concerns included exces-

sive paperwork, large caseloads, and inadequate time to instruct due to noninstructional duties and meetings.

Research on how special education teachers perceive their working conditions provides valuable information. This information facilitates identification of specific working conditions that stress teachers and contribute to burn-out and attrition. Identification of these working conditions constitutes an important part of the State's effort to initiate systemic recruitment and retention plans, stem the tide of attrition, and close the gap between supply and demand. Such research also provides information helpful in designing preservice and inservice teacher training programs that prepare teachers to cope with professional demands in special education. Indeed, Hawai'i has implemented a series of initiatives and actions to (a) increase the supply of newly certified special educators, (b) promote retention of current special educators, (c) alter attrition and "teacher flight" from special education, and (d) improve working conditions in special education. These initiatives are described in multiple documents including the DOE's recruitment and retention plan (Hawai'i DOE, 1997), plans constructed by a joint DOE-UH task force (Author, 1997), and the Felix Action Plan (Hawai'i DOE, 1999).

The current survey, as well as many other surveys, identified various types of problematic working conditions. Classroom teachers and administrators can exert direct control over *alterable* conditions, but cannot exert direct control over fixed conditions or *givens*. For example, IDEA requirements are intended to ensure appropriate services for students with disabilities; all students who qualify for special education services must have a written Individualized Education Plan (IEP). These are *givens*. However, procedures that states and local school districts adopt to comply with federal law are sometimes implemented inefficiently. These procedures constitute one important *alterable* condition. A comprehensive study of the management and accountability of the Hawai'i DOE confirmed that: (a) the referral-to-service provision process for special education is cumbersome and overburdened by bureaucratic paperwork; (b) such procedures reduce contact time that teachers and related service providers, such as counselors, would otherwise invest in providing direct services to their students; and (c) this state of affairs exacerbates job stress (Schrage, Barber, Barber, McDougall, & Abang, 1998).

Results of the current survey should be interpreted with caution because of limitations inherent in the convenience sampling method used in this study. It is likely that the respondents, as a group, possessed more years of teaching experience and greater levels of special education teacher certification than the overall population of special education teachers, on Oahu, and throughout the State. For example, 83% of the respondents in this study indicated that they were certified to teach special education. However, a study that employed stratified random sampling of special education teachers one year prior to our study, as well as a follow-up study one year later, indicated that only about one-half of the individuals employed as special education teachers in Hawai'i were fully certified to teach special education; the remaining individuals were in the process of seeking certification, or enrolled in emergency certification programs, or probationary teachers, or certified in general education but teaching out-of-field (Schrage & McDougall, 1997). Consequently, teachers without full certification to teach special education, as well as teachers with fewer years of experience, were underrepresented among the respondent group in our study. Nonetheless, the results of our study mirror, for the most part, results obtained in the aforementioned studies of special educators' working conditions in the State of Hawai'i.

By identifying alterable conditions, educators and employers can develop, prioritize, and implement viable strategies to alter changeable working conditions and improve teachers' job satisfaction. The working conditions that respondents identified as problematic in the current study are consistent with conditions identified in the research literature. The magnitude of these work-related issues suggests that many parties – state departments of education, state and local school boards, legislators, universities, parents, local communities, unions and professional organizations, general and special education teachers, and related service personnel – will have to serve collaboratively as change agents to improve working conditions in special education, in Hawai'i, and throughout the nation.

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