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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the Rural Special Education Preservice Project which is intended to increase the number of appropriately certified teachers in rural districts and special education cooperatives in Kansas. Problems in the state include a shortage of special education teachers, increased numbers of students qualifying for special education, high cost, high attrition among teachers in rural areas, and high travel demands placed on both students and teachers. The project is addressing these needs through two major components, first, identifying individuals currently working in rural districts and assisting them in pursuing initial or additional certification in special education; and second, the development and dissemination of specific information on rural education to both students and faculty members in university departmental certification-track, supervision, and administration classes. The first component provides stipends to identified teachers enabling them to use classroom release time to attend university courses and participate in a school year practicum. An orienting seminar focuses on issues in rural special education. The second component has involved development of a faculty workshop and 8 to 10 modules on topics in rural special education. Evaluation data indicate satisfaction is high with both participants and school district administrators. (DB)

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IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN RURAL KANSAS

Introduction

Kansas has long been recognized not only as an important agricultural area but also as an example of the personification of the term "rural". Accordingly, approximately 83 percent, or 253, of the 304 school districts in Kansas meet the criteria for rural devised by the United States Department of Education. As a rural state, Kansas confronts the same types of special education-related problems common to rural areas throughout the country.

Kansas faces a shortage of special education teachers. According to a survey by Jack Skillet of Emporia State University, this shortage can be attributed to a variety of causes including a decline in the number of teaching graduates from Kansas schools. His findings ascribe this decline to students seeking better paying jobs and the availability to women of a wider range of employment opportunities.

Traditionally, there also has been a large attrition rate in rural school districts and special education cooperatives. Projections by the Kansas State Department of Education for the 1987-1988 school year indicate a state-wide total of 159 special education vacancies. Fifty percent of these vacancies occur in rural districts. This vacancy projection reflects a 50 percent increase over vacancies reported in 1984.

Additionally, since the inception of federal and state special education legislation and accompanying regulations, there has been an increase in the number of students who qualify for and must be provided special education services. These requirements place increased demands on all school districts in a state. However, these demands often are more taxing for rural districts operating on lower tax bases, faced with staffing problems, and isolated geographically and professionally.

Costs to provide services to students with disabilities are high in rural areas of Kansas. A 1976 study by Donald Herbel indicated that the per pupil costs for students with disabilities ranged from a low of \$473.62 for students with speech impairments to a high of \$7076.00 for students with multiple handicaps in districts with enrollments of up to 399 students. In special education cooperatives, costs ranged from a low of \$259.72 for students with speech impairments to a high of \$3723.22 for teenage mother programs.

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Another problem and one that relates to high educational costs, to the provision of services for students with low incidence disabilities, to the shortage of trained special education personnel, and to recruitment and retention difficulties is travel demands placed on both students and teachers in many rural areas. According to the Kansas City Times (October 26, 1987) students and teachers may travel as far as 90 miles to get to their classrooms. Students with severe disabilities are among those most often transported the longest distance. Teachers in rural areas, especially those in itinerant positions, also appear to travel the greatest amount of distances in performing their roles.

Project Intent/Impact

The Special Education Department at the University of Kansas initiated the Rural Special Education Preservice Project to address these numerous critical needs which challenge rural Kansas school districts and cooperatives seeking to provide appropriate special education services. This project is designed to favorably impact both the availability and the quality of educational programming for a wide range of rural students with disabilities. It also is designed to positively impact both the training available to rural educational personnel, and the staffing needs of rural school districts and cooperatives throughout the state. These positive effects are directly related to the ability of the project to increase staffing and maintain stability in rural districts. The needs of all targeted groups are being served through two major project components.

Project Overview

The Rural Special Education Preservice project sponsored by the Department of Special Education at the University of Kansas and funded by a three year federal grant was designed to provide special education preservice training for individuals who are currently, or may, at some time, be employed in a rural setting. The primary purpose of this project is to increase the number of appropriately certified special education teachers in rural districts and special education cooperatives in Kansas, and to maximize the likelihood that these individuals will choose to remain employed in a rural setting.

The Project is addressing these needs through two major components. The first is directed towards identifying individuals currently working in rural districts and assisting them in pursuing initial or additional certification in special education. The second component targets the development and the dissemination of rural specific information to both students and faculty members in departmental certification-track, supervision, and administration classes. The goal is to provide students who may eventually teach in rural areas with the specific information and skills necessary

to perform effectively and, hopefully, on a long-term basis.

Initial funding for the project was received in 1986. The program now is in its second year of operation with accomplishments towards achieving major project purposes having been realized in both project components.

Component One

The first major component is directed specifically towards teachers currently working in rural districts and assists them in pursuing training in special education certification tracks. Participants are recruited for certification programs in special education that reflect the needs of their home districts. They are nominated by a district administrative personnel and potential nominees may be from any of the following groups:

1. Individuals, currently certified in one area of special education, who wish to obtain certification in an area for which there is higher local need (ie. EMH certified seeking ED certification).

2. Individuals, currently provisionally certified, at risk of losing that status because course work or practicum have not been completed.

3. Individuals, not provisionally certified, currently filling vacancies in special education settings.

4. Individuals, currently teaching in regular education, seeking special education certification in an area in which district administration agrees to place them when provisional certification has been achieved.

A goal of 15 participants has been established for each of the three project years. Final selection of these participants is based on the following factors and procedures:

1. Evidence that district needs will be met as a result of the individual's participation in the project as judged by the district administration's rationale for nomination.

2. Evidence that the individual is likely to be a stable and continuing member of the community as determined by a direct interview with both the nominee and the district administration.

3. Evidence that the individual is eligible to enroll in coursework and qualified to perform satisfactorily at the graduate level based on transcripts and professional recommendations.

4. The achievement of a balanced representation of districts from which nominations are made.

5. Date of application.

Participants are provided stipends that enable them to take advantage of classroom release time to attend courses at the University, as well as to participate in a 4 to 8 week school year practicum. Direct stipend payments assist participants in defraying educational and transportation costs, as well as living expenses should the participant need to relocate during practicum.

These funds serve to reinforce the participant's efforts and to encourage continued study in the field of special education.

Additionally, funds are provided on a contractual basis to participating school districts and cooperatives to cover substitute costs resulting from the participant's classroom release time. In this manner:

1. Participating teachers continue to receive their full salaries while taking part in the project;
2. Participants profit from the opportunity to experience a school-year practicum instead of the often less realistic situation of a summer school practicum;
3. Rural districts and cooperatives benefit from a cost-effective method of staff development;
4. Rural districts and cooperatives are spared the expense of substitute costs.

These funds serve to reinforce districts for supporting teachers seeking to improve their individuals skills.

Another essential ingredient of this first project component is access for teachers to an orienting seminar specific to current, issues crucial to rural special education. Both the entire seminar and individual topic materials are made available to participants on an as-needed basis during and after project participation. By the third year of the project the seminar will be developed into a regularly scheduled course providing all departmental students with direct access to a rural-specific class. Seven seminar topics have been established based on a literature review, a review of available rural oriented materials, surveys of district and cooperative administrative personnel, as well as first year project participants, and department faculty. Seminar topics are: 1. An Overview of Rural Specific Issues as Reported in the Literature; 2. Consulting Skills/The Importance and Development of Cooperative Relationships; 3. Effective Parent/Professional Relationships; 4. Management Skills/ Personal, Professional, Classroom-oriented; 5. Effective Use and Training of Paraprofessionals; 6. Identification and Effective Use of Local Resources; 7. Technology in Rural Special Education.

In the case of each specific seminar topic, goals and objectives, lecture materials, opportunities for group interaction and discussion, readings, resources, and a bibliography have been identified from available materials or specifically developed to match the needs of project participants. Seminar evaluation instruments and activities have also been developed and an emphasis has been placed on the value of open and on-going feedback in order to assure that the seminar continues to evolve as an appropriate and effective educational tool.

Additionally, an on-going literature review related to rural culture, issues, families, general education, and special education has been carried on during the first two years of the project and will be continued throughout project tenure. Relevant books, periodicals, journal articles, monographs, conference presentations, and

other sources have been continually collected, reviewed, and abstracted. Each project participant has been provided with both annually updated copies of all abstracted materials, and an annually updated rural-oriented bibliography.

A rural special education resource center has been established in the project office for use by participants, district administrators, parents, faculty and staff members, as well as other interested parties. This resource center offers originals of all rural oriented materials on hand, as well as copies of the abstracted materials, lists of resources in rural areas and copies of rural-specific journals, books and other publications. Rural specific publications and journals have also been placed in the Special Education Library for the general use of the department.

In addition to the opportunities provided for on-campus study, independent study, an intensive practicum during the school year, and funding for participants and their home districts, project staff is now working with others in the Special Education Department to extend the availability of computer assisted instructional courses in the attempt to reach even more teachers in rural areas.

During the first project year (1986-1987) 11 individuals participated both in coursework and practicum under the auspices of the project. Participants were in the areas of:

Severe Multiple Handicaps	5
Emotional Disturbance	2
Learning Disabilities	2
Vocational Planning & Transition	1
Early Childhood Education for the Handicapped	1

In addition, two individuals, presently teaching in a rural area but not in need practicum for certification, as well as two persons, not presently teaching in a rural district but planning to do so, also were provided with stipend funds for coursework toward certification in the areas of:

Learning Disabilities (Secondary)	2
Learning Disabilities (Elementary) with additional certification in either Emotional Disturbance or Educable Mentally Handicapped	2

Follow-up information on all first year participants indicates that ten of the 11 practicum participants have remained in their original rural home district serving a population that reflects the specific needs of the district. One individual married and left the state but continues to teach in a rural area. Of the four students who received stipend monies only, the two who were previously employed by a rural district remained in that district and the two, who were not previously teaching, accepted positions in rural areas of the state.

To this point in project year two (1986-1987) 19 individuals have been nominated for participation in either coursework or practicum. Nominees are in the areas of:

Severe Multiple Handicaps	7
Emotional Disturbance	2
Learning Disabilities	3
Trainable Mentally Handicapped	2
Early Childhood Education for the Handicapped	2
Speech	1
Special Education Administration	2

Two individuals were placed in practicum during the Fall semester of project year two. Additionally, seven students took coursework (either on campus or by independent study) towards certification. During the second semester of project year two, six individuals are participating in practica, two students are tentatively scheduled for practica, and five students are taking coursework toward certification.

At the end of the second project year it is anticipated that at least nine individuals will be fully or provisionally certified in special education:

Severe Multiple Handicaps	4
Emotional Disturbance	1
Trainable Mentally Handicapped	2
Early Childhood Education for the Handicapped	2

Participants, not yet certified, are progressing toward certification and are projected to complete practicum requirements during project year three. In addition to these continuing participants who will complete their certification training in year three, four additional participants already have been nominated for year three.

Component Two

The second major project component targets the development and dissemination of rural-specific information and materials in departmental certification-track classes, and in special education supervision and administration classes. This aspect of the project is based on the premises that: a knowledgeable faculty is requisite to effective rural teacher education and; any program designed to train individuals prepared to teach in a rural environment must go beyond the generic emphasizing skills specific to success in this environment. This component focuses on training special educators who are prepared to:

1. accept the characteristics specific to rural communities
2. perform effectively in this environment, and
3. remain in rural special education.

Activities here include the development and implementation of a faculty workshop, and the development of eight to ten modules related to specific topics in rural special education. The first full faculty workshop is scheduled for the second semester of project year two. Issues, format, and materials have been planned based on a survey distributed to faculty and rural administrators during project year one. Specific emphasized topics are Project purposes, secondary and pre-school services, certification issues, recruitment and retentions, and possible state of the art measures,

While module topics were initially similar to seminar topics, feedback from faculty and staff members, district administrators, and first year participants helped to focus these topic areas more specifically on perceived individual needs.

Evaluation instruments have been designed for both the faculty workshop and the individual modules. Feedback from these evaluations will be utilized to modify and improve both these instructional methods.

Evaluation Results

Evaluation data indicate satisfaction with this project is high with both participants and school district administration. The majority of the first-year participants strongly indicate they would recommend this program to others. Participant ratings were very favorable in respect to practicum experience, indicating especially high satisfaction with both the relevance of the practicum experience and the quality of the training. Service delivery methods related to application and enrollment procedures were rated somewhat lower but still in the above average satisfaction range. Participants also indicate above average satisfaction with coursework, tests, time requirements, supervision, feedback, follow-up, and stipends. Since these evaluation results were gathered from the first group of project participants, all ratings, comments, and suggestions for improvement have been incorporated if feasible.

School administrative personnel who responded to the first year evaluation also indicate high levels of satisfaction with the presentation of general project information, the training that the project afforded their teachers, and the contractual arrangements established between the project and their school districts. Areas of concern were clarity of the contractual arrangements and general clarity of the contracts themselves. These issues were not directly related to project service delivery methods. One area of concern related to service delivery, however, was provision of feedback on participant performance to school district administrative personnel. Because of this concern more feedback is being provided to administrative personnel, though in a general manner.

Overall Impact/Conclusions

The intent of the Rural Special Education Preservice Project is to train individuals who currently are, or who may, at some time, be employed in a rural special education setting. A primary purpose is to increase the numbers of appropriately trained and certified special educators in rural districts in Kansas and to maximize the probability that they will choose to remain employed in that setting. It is projected that by the end of the third project year approximately 45 teachers from rural districts will have completed or made strides toward special education certification.

This project holds the potential to make major favorable impact in several critical areas. First, the needs of rural districts and cooperatives are impacted as they are provided the opportunity for a cost-effective and efficient program of staff development. Second, the needs of students with disabilities living in rural settings are impacted as they are provided the opportunity for an appropriate education from a well trained teacher in a stable environment. Third, the needs of rural teachers are impacted because the opportunity to pursue further education and to improve oneself professionally is now open to those individuals who often previously could not continue in school because of geographic distances and financial constraints. Fourth, the needs of family members, peers, siblings, and other members of rural communities are impacted by the improvement in educational opportunity and increased future potential for the student with a disability. Fifth, the various categorical areas of special education and the faculty and staff affiliated with those areas are impacted. Because of project emphasis on faculty development, joint planning, and increased attention to the specific needs of rural special education, the already available highly recognized teacher training programs can only be improved.

Program design holds input opportunities for each of these many constituencies. This results in a cohesive, coordinated approach to delivering improved educational opportunities to rural students with disabilities. This process can be expected to improve with ongoing refinements, and to continue to enhance rural special education in answering the critical rural teacher shortage.

The following section describes some of the aspects of the Rural Special Education Preservice Project that have been instrumental in project effectiveness. These are included here to emphasize:

1. the importance of open collegial communication among all involved parties (i.e. project staff, district administration, and teacher-participants)

2. the importance of the establishment of evaluation methodology and the on-going utilization of evaluation information to assure effective service delivery and accountability.

3. the importance of the continued availability of the university as a resource for preservice and inservice training and staff development.

Specific Activities

1. Announcements of project availability and a description of major project purposes, components, and objectives are sent to each eligible school district, special education cooperative, and special education agency three times per year:

- at the end of the summer in order to be in time for fall participation
- at the end of the fall semester in order to be in time for spring participation
- in the middle of the spring semester in order to be in time for summer participation.

2. Besides these mail announcements, an announcement is placed on the Kansas Bulletin Board of SpecialNet in the fall and spring. The project coordinator also disseminates information related to the project at state-wide conferences pertinent to special education or rural issues. The coordinator also disseminates information through a network of past participants who have proven to be eager to share this information with their colleagues. Finally, notification of the project also has been aided by faculty members in the various categorical areas who often are aware of areas of extreme need within the state.

3. Active interaction with each participant is one of the cornerstones of the success of this project. From initial nomination, through application and enrollment, and participation in coursework or practicum, the project coordinator works closely with each participant and his/her district and his/her departmental faculty advisor to design a program that is in the best interests of both the participant and the school district. Pre-participation visits are made to each accepted nominee's home school where the project coordinator personally meets the nominee to discuss personal and professional goals and objectives relative to specific classroom and district goals and objectives.

The coordinator then conducts a through pre-participation assessment of the nominee's instructional skills. The assessment instrument has been designed based on the observational and evaluation forms utilized by the various categorical areas of the department. It is also utilized as a post-participation measure of skill acquisition and goal achievement. Based on the conversation

with and the observation of the nominee, and in consideration of district goals and objectives, a set of goals is established for each participant.

4. While accepted nominees and their home districts/cooperatives are informed of enrollment procedures for each semester of the project, assistance in enrollment is offered to participants who reside long distances from the campus. Enrollment by mail is utilized for participants who enroll in independent study courses, or who participate only in a practicum.

5. A list of "best practices" practica sites has been developed based on project staff experience, faculty input, categorical area, and geographic location. Specific arrangements among participants, home school administration, practica site master teacher, practica site administration, and the Graduate Education Office are coordinated by project staff. Because of the actions of this project and a previous pre-service program sponsored through the Department of Special Education, it has been possible to continue to add to the list of "best practices" practica sites and by the end of this project in 1989, there should be a much wider array of quality practica sites in the rural sections of the state, thus providing future teachers the opportunity for a good practicum experience within a geographically convenient location.

6. Contractual arrangements with participating districts or cooperatives for reimbursement of substitute costs are established according to University and state contracts. These allow districts to provide release time for their nominated participants without entailing costly substitute costs for the district. This incentive to rural districts, which often operate under lower tax bases, allows these districts the opportunity for a high quality, cost-effective method of staff development.

7. Arrangements with Residential Services at both the Lawrence and Kansas City campuses have been established. Because of a wide geographical spread of both participant's home districts and practica sites, some students may be required to relocate during their practicum participation.