

---

A Report on the Special Education  
Mentoring Grant in  
South Carolina

---

June 2011

Center for Educator Recruitment,  
Retention, & Advancement (CERRA)

South Carolina Department of Education

## **Introduction**

The following report outlines the three-year Special Education Mentoring Grant awarded to the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) from July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2011. The main purpose of this grant was to develop an advanced training for mentors who work with new special education teachers in South Carolina. The report provides a detailed overview of the grant including its five objectives, data connected to various grant-related activities, and results from the evaluation period which took place during the last year of the grant. The first section is a review of the literature that supports the need for a grant of this nature, as well as data linked to special education in South Carolina.

### **Review of the Literature – A National Perspective**

A major challenge in public education is retaining highly qualified and effective teachers in every classroom. Growing attrition rates, particularly among beginning teachers, is one of the main contributing factors to the national shortage of successful educators. Despite the reasons teachers leave the profession so early in their careers, their turnover has both economic and academic impact in our schools and districts. Students lose the value of being taught by an experienced teacher, and schools and districts face the challenges of recruiting and training new hires.

While the national teacher turnover rate is about 17%, a number of studies have found that as many as 50% of teachers leave within the first five years of entry into the profession (see Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). These staggering numbers, whether caused by unfavorable working conditions, change in occupation, or other personal reasons, suggest a potentially serious problem in the early years of a teacher's career.

Similarly, more than half of all special education teachers leave the profession or transfer into regular education classes every four years (McLeskey et al., 2004), making special education a field of interest regarding teacher attrition. Over the last decade, researchers have cited special education teacher attrition rates ranging from 10% to 20% each year (Boe & Cook, 2006; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Whitaker, 2000). Although this range is consistent with the previously cited turnover rate of all teachers (17%), researchers concluded that special education teachers were about 2.5 times more likely than other teachers to move from their schools or leave the teaching profession altogether (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

One feature in schools that has proven to increase retention is mentoring and induction. Mentoring is one critical aspect of a comprehensive induction program that facilitates the pairing of a beginning teacher with a veteran educator to assist with the transition into the classroom. Research has proven that mentoring, in its various forms, can yield higher retention rates (Parker et al., 2009; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; see Corbell et al., 2010), one of several goals that teacher induction programs are designed to meet. Without retention, however, other significant outcomes like increasing teacher effectiveness and improving student achievement could not occur.

Mentoring was also found to have a positive impact on new special education teachers' perceived effectiveness and intent to remain in the field (Billingsley et al., 2004; Boe et al., 2008; Whitaker, 2000). In one study, most of the early career special educators indicated that "informal help from other colleagues" was helpful as it was specific to their needs. Some of the formal mentoring programs available to them, however, were not helpful (Billingsley et al., 2004). While these teachers were not specifically asked to further explain their responses, one can infer that the "formal" programs offered were not customized for a beginning special education teacher. Given the diverse needs of special education teachers and their students, carefully-designed and organized induction support is needed, including a trained mentor who fully understands the needs of a novice special educator.

### South Carolina Data

Since 2001, CERRA has administered its annual Teacher/Administrator Supply and Demand Survey. Through collaboration with representatives in each of the state's school districts and special schools, CERRA compiles a statewide report detailing hiring, vacancy, and departure data for widespread use by education decision-makers in South Carolina. For the last ten years, as long as this information has been available, special education (excluding speech therapy) has accounted for the single largest share of vacant teacher positions in the state, ranging from about 14% to more than 30% of all vacancies. For four consecutive years in 2000 to 2004, special education explained approximately 30% of all statewide vacancies. This percentage dropped to a range of 22% to 24% from 2005 through 2008 and fell to just 14% in 2009. The most recent data from the 2010-2011 school year revealed that 29% of all vacant teacher positions in South Carolina were in special education. Although this percentage has fluctuated over time, vacancies in special education consistently outnumber the unfilled teacher positions in other content areas.

A similar trend has occurred in the number of special education teachers hired each year. With the exception of teachers who possess an elementary/early childhood certification, special educators have represented the largest portion of public school teachers hired in South Carolina since this information became available in 2001. Hiring and vacancy data like these signify a serious problem in the field of special education. Despite the reasons, districts continue to have trouble recruiting and retaining teachers in this specialized subject area.

Additional data were collected through another survey administered by CERRA in 2008 and 2009. All public school districts and special schools in the state were asked to submit information related to their special education teachers and students with disabilities. The objective of this data collection effort was to gain a better understanding of special education in South Carolina, particularly focusing on the retention of new special education teachers. Some results from the 2009 survey are highlighted below, and the remaining data are included in Attachment A.

- 62 districts and 3 special schools (South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice, and Palmetto Unified) submitted a survey.

- The proportion of special education students enrolled in these districts ranged from 8.7% to 26.5%. In DJJ and SCSD, these percentages were much higher at 32.6% and 100%, respectively.
- The percentage of special education teachers who did not return to their districts in 2009-10 ranged from 0% to 33.3%. Ten districts and special schools had special educator attrition rates of more than 20%.
- Of the special education teachers who left, 28% retired, 20% moved out of the area, and 13% left due to termination, reduction in force, or did not qualify for SC certificate.

As substantiated in the literature, a successful mentoring program can produce many positive results for students, teachers, and entire school communities. CERRA, in partnership with the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), provides a comprehensive, three-day initial training for educators who wish to become certified mentors. This training focuses on the needs of all beginning teachers, but does not address the diversity that exists in various certification areas including special education. Because such specialized mentor training did not exist in South Carolina, the Office of Exception Children at the SCDE created an opportunity for CERRA to develop an advanced training for mentors who work with new special education teachers.

Below is a brief description of the grant – its origin and objectives and data produced from numerous grant initiatives.

### **Grant Overview**

In the fall of 2007, a member of the South Carolina Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities asked CERRA representative, Ann Marie Taylor<sup>1</sup>, to attend one of the group's meetings. During sub-committee work time, Ms. Taylor chose to work with the recruitment and retention group and shared concerns about mentoring new special education teachers. The group discussed the idea that mentor teachers who are assigned to support special educators require additional training and support strategies and concluded that an advanced mentor training for experienced teachers who work with these novices should be developed at the state level.

To turn this idea into a reality, Ms. Taylor requested funds through the Office of Exceptional Children at the SCDE and identified some possible ways a partnership between CERRA and the SCDE could positively affect the special education recruitment and retention issue in South Carolina. Drs. Jim Rex and Gayle Sawyer, State Superintendent of Education and Executive Director of CERRA, respectively, approved a three-year fund allocation plan and created a grant agreement with five objectives:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ann Marie Taylor is the 2008 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and is Nationally Board Certified. She has been a special educator since 2000, teaching students with learning disabilities, moderate mental disabilities, and severe and profound disabilities.

1. Establish a position at CERRA to develop and establish recruitment and mentoring initiatives for special education teachers;
2. Develop a mentor training component specifically for special education teachers and administrators;
3. Target high need schools/school districts in regard to retention of special education teachers;
4. Partner with teacher education institutions to provide specialized mentor training; and
5. Assist in the recruitment of special education teachers.

Grant Objective #1: *Establish a position at CERRA to develop and establish recruitment and mentoring initiatives for special education teachers*

In July 2008, CERRA named Ann Marie Taylor the Special Education Mentoring Coordinator (will be referred to as Grant Coordinator) to oversee all activities funded by the grant. The Grant Coordinator remained a member of CERRA's staff for the three years the grant was in progress.

Grant Objective #2: *Develop a mentor training component specifically for special education teachers and administrators*

To assist in the development of the training components, the Grant Coordinator convened a task force in October 2008 that consisted of special education teachers, regular education teachers, pre-service teachers, district mentor coordinators, certified mentors, and special education directors. The group discussed ideas, personal experiences, relevant research, and best practices related to mentoring new special education teachers. After several months of research and planning, the Special Education Advanced Mentor Training was created and piloted in February 2009.

Since its inception, 15 regional and statewide trainings have been held, and nearly 300 educators were in attendance. Representatives from more than 60 percent of all public school districts and special schools, including the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind and the Department of Juvenile Justice, attended the trainings. The participants served in many roles including certified mentors, district mentor coordinators, special education directors, college faculty and staff, principals, assistant principals, special education teachers, regular education teachers, and speech and language pathologists.

This one-day advanced mentor training was designed to provide tools for teachers and administrators to use when working with new special education teachers. It offers a framework for mentors to tailor their support and ensure that it meets the diverse needs of special educators. The training addresses several aspects of mentoring that an educator must recognize in order to effectively support a beginning special education teacher. Training participants must: understand the purpose of mentoring and mentor roles, understand the data in regard to special educator attrition and the implications for South Carolina students with disabilities, gain skills and develop tools to mentor new special educators, and build relationships with other educators passionate about our children with special needs. The prerequisite for this training is the three-

day South Carolina Initial Mentor Training, also provided by CERRA in partnership with the SCDE.

At the end of each training session, participants were asked to complete an evaluation and indicate the extent to which the training met four stated outcomes. After completing the Special Education Advanced Mentor Training, participants should be able to:

1. Create and maintain a professional growth environment for new special education teachers grounded in the norms of continuous inquiry, ongoing assessment, and problem-solving;
2. Recognize and practice the attitudes, behaviors, and skills of an effective mentor;
3. Identify the needs of the beginning special education teacher and modify support in response to those needs; and
4. Effectively use various tools that facilitate a comprehensive mentoring program.

Using a scale from 1 to 4, the following data are based on results from 152 completed evaluations:

- Outcome 1 – 96% selected a “4,” indicating that the training met this outcome to a great extent.
- Outcome 2 – 94% selected a “4,” indicating that the training met this outcome to a great extent.
- Outcome 3 – 95% selected a “4,” indicating that the training met this outcome to a great extent.
- Outcome 4 – 95% selected a “4,” indicating that the training met this outcome to a great extent.

Participants also provided open-ended comments about their training experience. They were instructed to describe the impact of the training, if the training met their expectations, and what, if any, information or assistance was missing from the training. While responses were varied, all educators who responded to the question about impact reported that the training was helpful and very much needed. Some participants described the training as one of the most valuable they had received because it was specific to their content area, and they now have the toolkit necessary to better support and meet the needs of their mentees. When asked if the training met their expectations, all participants responded “yes,” and many went on to say that the training exceeded their expectations. Finally, participants admitted that the only information or assistance they needed was additional trainings like this one which should include more tools and strategies to improve their work with beginning special education teachers, involvement in hands-on activities related to mentoring, and ongoing support via blogs, forums, and message boards.

Grant Objective #3: *Target high-need schools/school districts in regard to retention of special education teachers*

The first Special Education Advanced Mentor Training was held in February 2009 at Francis Marion University, located in the most rural area of the state known as the Pee Dee Region. This

region was targeted because many of its schools and districts are known for having high levels of poverty and teacher turnover and minimal student performance. This approach was successful as a number of high-need school districts, including Dillon 1 and 2, Florence 1, Marion 2, Marlboro, Sumter 17, Williamsburg, and the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, attended the first training. Subsequent regional trainings were held in other areas of the state, where needs were identified and/or a school or district representative made a special request.

Based on previous trainings, the number of participants often depended on location. Because some of the trainings did not yield a large number of participants, the final trainings, starting in July 2010, were offered statewide in a more central and convenient location in hopes that more educators would be in attendance. A total of six statewide trainings were held between July 2010 and June 2011 in Rock Hill and Columbia, South Carolina. Nearly 150 educators participated in these statewide trainings.

In addition to hosting trainings, the Grant Coordinator began forming a partnership with Dillon 2 in the fall of 2008, serving as a mentor for four new special education teachers at East Elementary School, Gordon Elementary School, Stewart Heights Elementary School, and JV Martin Junior High School. Each school was labeled as a “geographic critical need school” by meeting one or more of the following criteria: a below average or at-risk absolute rating (based on student achievement), a teacher turnover rate of 20% or higher for the past three years, and a poverty index of 70% or higher (based on the number of students who qualify for Medicaid or subsidized lunch). Relationships with these particular schools were developed so the Grant Coordinator could experience the work of a mentor and more effectively train others in this role.

Grant Objective #4: *Partner with teacher education institutions to provide specialized mentor training*

Colleges and universities are vital players in teacher recruitment and retention. Their faculty and staff are responsible for preparing inexperienced educators to enter the classroom with the necessary knowledge and skills to become effective teachers and leaders. Accordingly, the Grant Coordinator invited faculty and staff from partnering teacher education institutions to attend the advanced mentor trainings. The intent of this collaborative effort was to provide our higher education partners with tools and strategies that enable them to provide support to the pre-service special education teachers they work with at the college level.

The Grant Coordinator also worked with teacher education institutions when she attended College Days on numerous campuses across the state and spoke to Teacher Cadets<sup>2</sup>, Teaching Fellows<sup>3</sup>, and pre-service teachers about the field of special education. The following South Carolina colleges and universities were represented: Anderson University, Coastal Carolina University, The Citadel, College of Charleston, Columbia College, Erskine College, Francis

---

<sup>2</sup> CERRA’s Teacher Cadet Program, established in more than 170 South Carolina high schools, encourages academically-talented students with exemplary interpersonal and leadership skills to consider teaching as a career.

<sup>3</sup> CERRA’s Teaching Fellows Program is designed to recruit high-achieving seniors for the education profession by providing scholarship funding for their attendance at one of the 11 designated teacher preparation institutions in South Carolina. A Fellow agrees to teach in the state one year for every year he/she receives funding.

Marion University, Lander University, Newberry College, North Greenville University, USC-Columbia, USC-Salkehatchie, USC-Upstate, and Winthrop University.

Finally, the Grant Coordinator held a Special Education Teacher Cadet Recruitment Fair at Columbia College. All of CERRA's College Partners were invited to participate and host a vendor table at the event. More information about the Recruitment Fair is provided below in Grant Objective #5.

Grant Objective #5: *Assist in the recruitment of special education teachers*

As the 2008 South Carolina Teacher of the Year, the Grant Coordinator was asked to speak to many different groups of educators and students across the state. Although the purpose of her travels was to speak about education in general, the focus often turned to special education. While visiting many of the Teacher Cadet sites in the state to discuss her experiences as a teacher, the Grant Coordinator found that her role often shifted from presenter to recruiter. Therefore, she continued to work with the Teacher Cadets and their instructors in an attempt to inform students about special education and ultimately generate an interest in the field.

Starting in the fall of 2009, the Grant Coordinator began to track whether or not her presentations were influencing Teacher Cadets' career choices. These students participated in a short, three-question pre- and post-survey to determine what effect, if any, the Grant Coordinator's presentation had on their intentions to pursue a teaching degree in special education. The following results are based on input from 95 Teacher Cadets:

- Because of the nature of the Teacher Cadet Program, a majority (79%) of the students were already considering the teaching profession. After hearing the Grant Coordinator's presentation, however, 87% were considering becoming a teacher.
- Before the presentation, only 32% (30) of the Teacher Cadets were considering becoming a special education teacher; after the presentation, 73% (69) felt this way.
- Of the 53 Teacher Cadets who indicated no desire to teach special education, 39 or 74% changed their minds implying that they were at least considering a career as a special education teacher.

Knowing that exposure to the field of special education made a difference for a significant number of high school students who were thinking about teaching as a career, CERRA held a recruitment fair for Teacher Cadets at Columbia College on March 6, 2010. The day included a motivational message from the Grant Coordinator, as well as several breakout sessions presented by experienced special education teachers and Teacher Cadet instructors. While the content of each session was different, all were aimed to inform the high school students about teaching students with disabilities and the field of special education in general. In attendance were approximately 70 Teacher Cadets, Teacher Cadet instructors, and special education teachers.

The final section of this report addresses the evaluation process of the grant. This process led to pertinent findings associated with the support, quality, and retention of special education teachers and mentors in South Carolina.



### **Grant Evaluation – Year Three**

The third and final year, starting July 1, 2010, served as an evaluation period for the Special Education Mentoring Grant. During this process, the Grant Coordinator and the Coordinator of Research and Program Development (will be referred to as Research Coordinator) at CERRA answered the following research questions:

- How has the Special Education Advanced Mentor Training affected the work of mentors who support special education teachers?
- To mentors who attended the training:
  - After attending the training, were you better equipped to mentor and support special education teachers?
  - Which aspects of the training were most/least helpful to you when working with special education teachers?
  - What information, tools, and/or strategies were not covered in the training that would have been helpful when working with special education teachers?
  - What are the barriers to keeping special education teachers in the classroom? What are solutions that could remedy these barriers?
  - What could be done to enhance your abilities to mentor and support special education teachers?
- In terms of special education in South Carolina, what are recommendations for the future?

In order to answer these research questions, the Grant Coordinator and Research Coordinator implemented two strategic evaluation tools during the third and final year: a survey to all educators who completed the training in a one-year time frame and one-on-one interviews based on those survey results.

#### **Survey**

The Grant Coordinator and Research Coordinator administered an online survey in September 2010 to all educators who completed the one-day Special Education Advanced Mentor Training between February 2009 and February 2010. Seventy-two of the 155 training participants submitted a completed survey, resulting in a 46.5% response rate. Questions were designed to generate results that assess the impact of the training, specifically regarding the perceptions, observations, and applied mentoring work of training participants. Participants were also asked to comment on the perceived weaknesses or gaps in the training based on their experiences in the field. This particular time frame was used to make certain the individuals trained had enough time and opportunity to implement in their schools and districts the mentor strategies learned in the training.

Survey respondents are employed in 36 public school districts and one special school; 55 of them are in schools and 17 work in district offices. Those who completed a survey serve in numerous and diverse roles in their respective schools and districts. Nearly half are special education teachers, followed by regular education teachers, district-level administrators, mentor coordinators, speech and language pathologists, and special education directors. Several

respondents fill dual roles such as special education director and teacher, mentor coordinator and regular education teacher, and mentor coordinator and human resources director.

Educators who attended the training were asked if, after attending the training, they served as a mentor to a first- or second-year special education teacher. Twenty-seven or 37.5% of them reported that they were the assigned mentor to a new special education teacher. Those who were not officially assigned as mentors were presented with a follow-up question to further gauge their levels of support among colleagues. All but four of them stated that they had provided some type of support to a special education teacher after completing the training. In addition to the tools provided in the training, forms of support included active listening, collaborating, providing resources, and being an advocate.

Survey respondents were instructed to rate the helpfulness of 12 different tools presented to them during the training. If any of the tools had not been utilized since the training, respondents were supposed to select the “did not use tool” category. Tools used by the largest number of training participants included: ABCs of SPED (acronyms used in special education), Mentor Roles, Mentee Needs Checklist (checklist outlining the mentee's strengths and areas for growth), Attitudinal Phase Chart (chart that depicts attitudes of first-year special education teachers at different times throughout the school year), Special Education Recruitment and Retention Data, and Individual Education Plan (IEP) Meeting Document. Of these frequently used tools, respondents rated the following as most helpful as they mentored and supported special education teachers: Mentor Roles, Mentee Needs Checklist, and Attitudinal Phase Chart.

The Interactive Journal was utilized by the fewest number of educators, and the Collaborative Assessment Logs were rated the lowest as less than 50% of survey respondents who used this tool reported it to be very helpful. Also included in the survey was a question prompting participants to identify any information and/or tools not covered in the training. While most educators declared that the training was beneficial and comprehensive, some felt a few aspects were missing: effective strategies to work with regular education teachers, guidelines for conducting IEP meetings, and implementation of behavior management plans. Although these areas were addressed in the training, participants felt they deserved more attention.

### Interviews

The Grant Coordinator and Research Coordinator conducted interviews with educators who submitted a survey and responded that they had mentored or supported a special education teacher after the training. The objective was to further measure the effects of the training related to the mentor's work with new special education teachers. A total of 17 educators were contacted for interviews, and ten agreed to participate in the process.

Included in the group of interviewees were three special education teachers, one speech and language pathologist, three regular education teachers, one special education director, one mentor coordinator, and one principal from public school districts across the state of South Carolina. Their years of experience in the education field ranged from 15 to 34 years; the average among interviewees was 25 years of service. The interviews were conducted to gather more in-depth information about meeting the needs of special educators in the state and to

further investigate how mentors can help beginning teachers address any obstacles that may exist in their schools and districts.

Educators who were interviewed are employed in ten very diverse districts in terms of size, location, and student population. Additionally, interviewees represent each of the five regions in the state: Upstate, Savannah River, Midlands, Pee Dee, and Lowcountry. Five interviews were conducted in person, four were completed by telephone, and one participant answered the questions electronically and submitted his responses through email.

The ten educators who agreed to be interviewed were asked several questions regarding their training experience, their mentoring work in the field, and the pressing needs of special education teachers in their districts. All of the teachers and administrators who were interviewed replied that they had mentored, either formally or informally, special education teachers at some point after the training. Some of the mentoring techniques included assistance with writing IEPs, attending IEP meetings, classroom observations, listening and advising, providing moral support, training on policies and procedures, help with classroom setup, instructional strategies, and behavior management tips.

After attending the Special Education Advanced Mentor Training, all ten educators who were interviewed said that they were more equipped to mentor and support special education teachers. The most interesting observation stemmed from the responses of regular education teachers and administrators. Because these educators do not specialize in teaching students with disabilities, they stated that the training helped them better understand the different needs of special education teachers. In particular, they reported a greater appreciation for the numerous requirements of special educators including detailed paperwork, comprehension of policies and procedures, frequent contact with parents, adherence to many safety regulations, and knowledge of diverse learning strategies. A special education director went on to say that she felt more prepared to observe classrooms as the training taught her to recognize instruction not conducive to the students.

Interviewees were also encouraged to discuss any specific information or activities presented in the training that enhanced their abilities to serve as effective mentors. They emphasized several tools learned in the training including the mentee needs checklist, the resource contact list, and the use of journals. Educators also mentioned the attitudinal phase chart, stating that it enabled them to understand the fluctuating emotions felt by teachers during their first year in the classroom. One of these educators is employed as a speech and language pathologist in a district that had the largest number of new special education teachers in the 2010-2011 school year. She described a situation where a special education teacher in her first year appeared to be adjusting well, but because of the chart, she knew her mentee was most likely experiencing a sense of disillusionment that typically sets in right before the mid-year holiday break. Had she not been familiar with the chart, the mentor insisted she would have not recognized the needs of the teacher nor would she have known how to provide support during this stage. This particular attitudinal phase involves novice teachers who work hard but feel as though they are not making any progress. This feeling often leaves them wondering if teaching is the right profession for them.

Hopefully, with the guidance of a good mentor, beginning teachers can overcome these feelings and thrive in their new role as educators. Regardless of their success, teachers will always face barriers that test their desires to remain in the classroom. When asked to identify some of these barriers, interviewees overwhelmingly discussed two topics: lack of support and understanding and paperwork requirements. Special education teachers expressed their concerns that building- and district-level administrators do not recognize the challenges they face on a daily basis and the isolation they feel due to this insufficient level of understanding and support. They went on to say that regular education teachers do not fully understand the needs of diverse learners and are consequently forced to teach these students without the proper training and support. One administrator and one regular education teacher agreed, both commenting that regular education teachers need additional training to better prepare them to work with special education students and teachers.

Nearly all teachers who were interviewed, including those in regular education, asserted that paperwork is a significant concern in special education. Not only is the amount of paperwork unrealistic at times, but the guidelines are changed so often that it is nearly impossible to keep up with requirements and expectations. One of the administrators (a principal) who was interviewed labeled the amount of record keeping as the “greatest reluctance” among special educators. The two other administrators declared that a lack of parental involvement is the toughest scenario faced by special education teachers.

Once the interviewees identified barriers to retain special education teachers, they were prompted to recommend solutions to remedy these issues. The predominant response was more training for administrators and regular education teachers that enhances their knowledge of special education and, therefore, enables them to provide adequate support to special educators in the field. One regular education teacher mentioned the need for all regular education teachers to take at least one course in special education. The idea would be to gain knowledge in the area of special education as many of the regular education classrooms now include students with special needs. She also suggested the development of short videos produced by special education teachers that focus on the needs of students with disabilities. For example, one video might focus on autism – its characteristics, associated behaviors, learning capabilities, and effective instructional strategies.

Finally, the interviewees were asked what could be done to enhance their abilities to mentor and support special education teachers. Specifically, what would make you a better mentor? Again, most of the educators suggested more training in special education at the school and district levels. Others recommended that CERRA continue to provide advanced mentor trainings that focus on special education teachers. One special education teacher wants her district to mandate CERRA’s mentor trainings to any faculty or staff involved with induction teachers. One regular education teacher proposed the creation of a network or forum where mentors from districts around the state could share best practices with one another on how to provide valuable support to special education teachers.

Results generated from the interviews and survey responses indicate that the Special Education Advanced Mentor Training made a positive difference in the work of mentors who support and advise special education teachers in South Carolina. Participants did, however, acknowledge

several areas for improvement that should be addressed in future trainings and professional development opportunities. Recommendations directed toward these improvements are described in the final section of this report.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

The Special Education Mentoring Grant has provided South Carolina certified mentors with additional tools and strategies to enhance the support they provide to special education teachers. Like with any training, though, there are always opportunities for further development. Listed below are areas for improvement to be considered in future discussions and planning sessions related to mentoring in special education.

1. Create a listserv for certified mentors in the state, offering them a way to keep connected and share ideas with one another, stay abreast of research and trends in mentoring and induction, and to inform them of professional development opportunities and advanced trainings in their areas.
2. Create and post videos or podcasts to address the needs in special education that were identified in the survey results and responses to interview questions. Professional development topics should: focus on characteristics of the thirteen disability categories and effective instructional strategies associated with each category, showcase successful co-teaching models where special and regular education teachers work together in inclusive environments to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and demonstrate positive behavior interventions that maximize learning opportunities in the classroom.
3. Create a training session for South Carolina administrators that highlights the needs of special education teachers and ways to support and retain these educators. The objectives of this training should be to make administrators more aware of obstacles faced by special educators including extensive amounts of paperwork, feelings of isolation, and lack of administrative understanding and support.
4. Continue CERRA's Special Education Advanced Mentor Training by conducting at least two statewide trainings per year for the next three school years. Based on survey and interview results, trainings should include additional information on the following topics: hands-on instruction so participants better understand how to use the tools and strategies in the field and more emphasis on guidelines for conducting IEP meetings (possibly a simulated IEP meeting). A more concerted effort should be made to include special education directors, principals, and assistant principals in the trainings.
5. Conduct additional research to better understand the needs of special education teachers in South Carolina. Specifically, research should incorporate case studies that examine beginning and veteran special education teachers to gain an in-depth look into their professional lives. Case study research methods should include interviews, classroom observations, faculty/team meeting attendance, and observation of parent-teacher communications. Because the current body of literature associated with the field of

special education is “limited and unfocused” and “scattered and thin” (Sindelar et al., 2010), more research in this area is both relevant and necessary.

This grant experience has allowed CERRA to investigate the needs of special education teachers and, more importantly, to create a professional development opportunity that provides mentors with the appropriate tools and information to address these needs. Also, CERRA was able to provide recommendations to be considered when training mentor teachers who work with special educators. The lack of scholarship linked to teacher preparation, mentoring and induction, and professional development in special education suggests that the Special Education Advanced Mentor Training in South Carolina is the first of its kind. This training was just one step in the right direction toward providing much-needed support to new special education teachers.

Professional development opportunities like CERRA’s mentor trainings (initial and advanced) are designed to create environments where teachers can grow in their roles as educators and life-long learners. Both beginning and experienced teachers have room for professional growth and can benefit from new strategies that improve their instruction. The quality of their work should improve as they complete various courses and trainings related to their designated positions and areas of specialty. Continued efforts to enhance teacher quality and increase instructional effectiveness should be encouraged as these gains will ultimately improve student achievement. CERRA and other education organizations must lead the way in exploring innovative ways to provide tailored support that meets the individual needs of all teachers in our state.

## **References**

- Billingsley, B., Carlson, E., & Klein, S. (2004). The working conditions and induction support of early career special educators. *Exceptional Children, 70*(3), 333-347.
- Boe, E. & Cook, L. (2006). The chronic and increasing shortage of fully certified teachers in special and general education. *Exceptional Children, 72*(4), 443-460.
- Boe, E., Cook, L., & Sunderland, R. (2008). Teacher turnover: Examining exit attrition, teaching area transfer, and school migration. *Exceptional Children, 75*(1), 7-31.
- Corbell, K., Reiman, A., & Nietfeld, J. (2008). The perceptions of success inventory for beginning teachers: Measuring its psychometric properties. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies, 24*(6), 1551-1563.
- McLeskey, J., & Billingsley, B. (2008). How does the quality and stability of the teaching force influence the research-to-practice gap?: A perspective on the teacher shortage in special education. *Remedial and Special Education, 29*(5), 293-305.
- McLeskey, J., Tyler, N., & Saunders Flippin, S. (2004). The supply of and demand for special education teachers: A review of research regarding the chronic shortage of special education teachers. *Journal of Special Education, 38*(1), 5-21.
- Parker, M., Ndoeye, A., & Imig, R. (2009). Keeping our teachers! Investigating mentoring practices to support and retain novice educators. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 17*(4), 329-341.
- Sindelar, P., Brownell, M., & Billingsley, B. (2010). Special education teacher education research: Current status and future directions. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 33*(1), 8-24.
- Smith, T. & Ingersoll, R. (2004). What are the effects of induction and mentoring on beginning teacher turnover? *American Educational Research Journal, 41*(3), 681-714.
- Whitaker, S. (2000). Mentoring beginning special education teachers and the relationship to attrition. *Exceptional Children, 66*(4), 546-566.

Report Prepared By:

Ann Marie Taylor, NBCT, Coordinator of Special Education Mentoring Grant, CERRA  
Dr. Jennifer Garrett, Coordinator of Research and Program Development, CERRA