IMPROVING RETENTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AND

PARAPROFESSIONALS

A Doctoral Capstone Project

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

Department of Secondary Education and Administrative Leadership

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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August 2022

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Dedication

This capstone research is dedicated to my husband and two daughters. Without your love, understanding, and unwavering support, this simply would not have been possible. I am forever grateful and hope for my two daughters, they have learned that with grit and determination you can achieve your goals.

Doug, you are and have always been my rock. Over the past three years, you have ensured that our daughters made it to their practices and games. You planned activities for them when I needed the time for my studies. This process and completion would not have been possible without you. Mom and Dad, you raised me to be a strong and independent woman and I hope I've made you proud.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of the newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals of the Colonial Intermediate Unit 20's(CIU20) onboarding process, engagement with staff, and preparedness as part of the CIU20 community to develop systems and strategies to increase CIU20 retention rates. Special education teachers and paraprofessional retention have been a severe concern for CIU20. A qualitative and quantitative mixed methods approach design was utilized, including a survey and a focus group as the primary data collection methods. Educational literature has identified research-based strategies to promote employee wellness, increase staff engagement, and create a positive work environment to improve teacher and support staff retention. The development and implementation of these research-based strategies will improve employee retention within CIU20. While the survey results were somewhat favorable of the current onboarding process, there are gaps identified based on research based best practices. Ultimately, the findings of this research study resulted positive outcomes and increase of the Group 2 ratings after participating in the study's intervention and justifies the continued use of the Check & Connect session with newly hired CIU20 employees. The areas of focus for enhancement to improve retention are: to provide more support by administrators and mentors in the classroom setting, review the induction program, improve upon upfront pieces of training, and continue to enhance the sense of belonging to the CIU20 organization by enhancing opportunities to build communication, collaboration, and trusting relationships across the CIU20 organization and our local school districts.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals is a serious

concern and a systemic problem for CIU20. As the Director of Special Education of an

organization employing 1,600 full and part-time employees deployed across thirteen

school districts, three career and technical centers, and five charter schools in

Northampton, Monroe, and Pike Counties, the impact of sustaining retention of special

education teachers and paraprofessionals has the most significant impact on student

achievement and meeting Colonial Intermediate Unit 20's (CIU20) mission to build

relationships, be responsive, and provide results as a service provider.

CIU20 is one of the twenty-nine intermediate units throughout Pennsylvania and

is the 8th largest IU by the number of public children served. CIU20 provides direct and

indirect services to 86,000 public school children across 104 schools, 9,000 non-public

school children, and 7,500 professional staff in the service region of 1,200 square miles.

CIU20 serves a mix of students coming from urban, suburban, and rural areas. The

students served have the most significant and complex needs in the areas of academic

instruction, medical conditions, social-emotional learning, and behaviors. Over one-half

of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged.

A high percentage of special education teachers and paraprofessionals resign

within one to three years of the hire date. According to Mansfield (2019), over the past

decade in Pennsylvania, 71% fewer teachers have been issued certifications. This

increases the challenge for all educational organizations to recruit for vacant positions.

Retention efforts are vital to maintaining our current staff pool and avoiding current

employees moving onto another organization. Perna (2022) shares that educational providers are at a major tipping point in education, 48% of teachers admitted they had considered quitting within the last 30 days. Of that number, 34% said they thought about leaving the profession entirely.

CIU20 Student Services and Human Resource Department administration team identified this problem as their number one concern within the organization. Educational literature has identified research-based strategies to promote employee wellness, increase staff engagement, and create a positive work environment to improve teacher and support staff retention. Attrition of classroom staff hurts school climate, the quality of the classroom environment, and student learning experiences, which collectively impact the future success of students and programs. Teachers must forge a human connection with students to reach and teach them effectively. Without that connection, today's younger generations simply will not move forward in their education and career journey. This is a non-negotiable; it's just who they are (Perna, 2022).

Special education teachers and paraprofessional recruitment and retention efforts have been a severe concern. CIU20 Administration gathers feedback from professional and support 10-month staff at the end of each year through a survey to gather their perspectives on the organization's climate, leadership support, and identify areas for improvement. Every year the lack of filling classroom positions and the revolving door of paraprofessional staff leads to stressors in the classroom by lack of support and the constant training of new staff. In addition, CIU20 employees have felt the effects of COVID-19 for more than a year. For many CIU20 employees, the pandemic has meant longer and harder hours, making an already stressful work environment even more

intense and causing many to question whether they can (and want) to continue in the education profession.

Furthermore, the inconsistency of gaining and sustaining a strong, collaborative, and unified classroom team and environment hurts job satisfaction and has a negative impact on student performance rates. CIU20 Human Resource Department struggles with keeping up with the onboarding process of new employees and identifies stress with recruitment, onboarding, and retaining staff. Approximately seven hundred new personnel have been hired since the fall of 2018, including three academic school years; 2018-2019, 2019-2020, & 2020-2021, and many have already resigned. During the 2021 -2022 school year, twelve special education teachers and eighty-five paraprofessional resignations from August 2021 through December 2022. CIU20 has hired thirty-three special education teachers and one hundred and sixteen paraprofessionals between July 2021 through December 2021. In December 2022, there were three special education teacher vacancies and sixty-eight paraprofessional positions. School districts located in CIU20 catchment area express frustration with the lack of recruiting, hiring, and retaining special education teachers and paraprofessionals in CIU20 classrooms.

Also, families are not satisfied with CIU20 recruitment and retention of professional and paraprofessional staff, which leads to dissatisfaction, resentment, and sometimes attorney involvement and due process hearings. All of these factors lead to concern by many stakeholder groups. The following research questions are of value and interest to learn and create initiatives that are impactful and sustainable to achieve strong recruitment and retention practices:

1. What is the difference in the perception of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals who were hired within the last year versus currently employed CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals hired within three years in their overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process?

2. How does the CIU20 Check and Connect program provide the support, confidence, and readiness needed to feel prepared to support students in the classroom?

3. What is the difference in the perception of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals who were hired within the last year versus currently employed CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals hired within three years in their overall experience with developing a sense of belonging?

Through this research study, CIU20 can use the retention and attrition data to identify the factors contributing to undesirable attrition, inform appropriate interventions and create a sustainable action plan to analyze data to improve retention. Developing and implementing research-based strategies will enhance employee retention within CIU20. If organizations can retain staff, there will be a decrease in the fiscal implications of the recruitment process. Throughout this research study, there may also be financial implications to consider increasing special education teachers' and paraprofessionals' salaries to stay competitive with the local school district to increase our retention efforts.

A mixed-methods approach that includes both quantitative & qualitative data will be utilized throughout the research study that consists of a survey and focus groups as the primary data collection methods to understand the special education teachers and paraprofessional perceptions of the onboarding process, engagement with staff, and

preparedness as part of the CIU20 community. Participants in this action research study will include newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals from the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021, and throughout the 2021 - 2022 school year assigned to CIU20 Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities, Physical Support, and Therapeutic Emotional Support Classroom Programs.

In summary, the researcher aspires to increase the CIU20 retention rate of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The following study will explore the development and implementation of research-based strategies to improve employee retention and the perceptions of current employees in their overall experience with developing a sense of belonging. The subsequent chapters will provide a review of the literature, research methodology, data results and analysis, and conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals plays a significant role in providing and sustaining high-quality instruction, support, services, and programming for students with special needs to increase student achievement. Educational literature has identified research-based strategies to promote employee wellness, increase staff engagement, and create a positive work environment to improve employee retention. Attrition of classroom staff hurts school climate, the quality of the classroom environment, and student learning experiences, which collectively impact students' future success and educational programs. To strengthen public school education and the sustainability of education programs, qualified and experienced special education teachers and paraprofessionals must be recruited and retained by school districts and intermediate units across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

This literature review focuses on newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals to increase retention. Some of the literature examined has a general focus consisting of educators, general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals in the education field. All of the literature reviewed for this research study is being applied specifically to newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals that are hired by an intermediate unit. Intermediate units are regional educational service agencies across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, established by the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Intermediate units are public entities that serve a given geographic area's educational needs and function as a step of organization above a public school district's but below that of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The Pennsylvania state system of intermediate units was created in 1970, as part of the public

school system of the Commonwealth. Intermediate units provide a broad array of services that may include: curriculum development and instructional improvement; educational planning services; instructional materials services (technology); continuing professional development; pupil personnel services; management services; and state and federal agency liaison services. Intermediate units are governed by a board of directors; each member is also a member of a local school board from the Intermediate unit's region. Intermediate units are funded by school districts, state and federal program-specific funding, and grants. Intermediate units do not have the power to tax. Annual budgets of the intermediate unit must be approved by a majority of the school boards in the districts it serves.

Billingsley (2010) noted that new special education teachers often report feeling overwhelmed as they continue to learn yet assume the same teaching responsibilities as their veteran colleagues. Due to the pressures and stress, they leave the profession. Shuls and Flores (2020) shared that an estimated 45% of beginning teachers leave the field of education within the first five years of their career and that young teachers (under the age of 30) are 71% more likely to leave teaching than middle-aged teachers (between 30-50 years of age). In a similar study, Tran and Smith (2020) cited "that the U.S. national teacher turnover rate is approximately 8% a year, two-thirds of which leave before retirement age" (p. 87).

Special education teachers have some unique challenges compared to the general education teachers, such as teaching across a broader range of grades and ages, taking responsibility for some of the legal requirements of special education, and working with both school and central administration (Billingsley, 2010). Paraprofessionals also have

unique challenges such as lack of pre-service training, mentor programs, and lack of professional development to support the role of helping students with disabilities. "Research over two decades indicates that special education teacher turnover is highest during the early career years when teachers are most vulnerable to problematic work conditions," Billingsley (2010, p. 42).

Within this chapter, the work of theorists, experts, and researchers are presented, analyzed, and synthesized to provide a comprehensive review of recent literature related to special education teachers and paraprofessionals employee retention, employee onboarding operations and process, the importance of having a sense of belonging, and preparedness to meet job responsibilities to support students with disabilities. This literature review discusses the development and implementation of research-based strategies to increase and sustain employee retention and the value of the investment in newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

Employee Retention

Education today faces a crisis as new special education teachers and paraprofessionals leave the profession at a high turnover rate. Consequently, teacher retention has been shown to positively influence student achievement. Through a review of research studies, Tran and Smith (2020) utilized Kelchtermans definition for teacher retention as "the need to prevent good teachers from leaving the job for the wrong reasons". Special education teacher retention is also a national issue (Henderson, 2014, p. 20). Long hours and demanding paperwork contribute to special education teacher attrition as 49 states and the District of Columbia currently report shortages of special educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

A similar study by Tran and Smith (2020) also noted "that 12% of teachers leave the profession within their first three years of teaching in the United States" (p. 89). Recent research literature identified critical factors of lack of mentoring, administrative support, monetary resources, collaboration among peers and administrators, stress, and school climate discontinuity, which have contributed to special education teacher and paraprofessional attrition. Shuls and Flores (2020) also noted that through their research that the stress level of educators also leads to difficulties in retaining teachers:

As noted by Jennings et al. (2017), a Gallup survey conducted in 2014 concluded that 46% of kindergarten through twelfth-grade teachers report high daily stress levels during the school year, one of the highest occurrences of stress among all occupational groups, including nurses (46%) and physicians (45%). Furthermore, a 2013 MetLife Survey of American teachers found that the majority of those surveyed, 51%, feel great stress at least several days a week (Markow et al. 2013). Once again, this issue tends to affect novice and beginning teachers more as the first five years of teaching is the career period where teachers report the most significant occurrence of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (p. 2).

Other problems that lead to teacher attrition include a lack of professional development and growth felt by teachers, feelings of solitude by beginning teachers, a negative work-life balance associated with the profession, and a lack of educator preparation before the first year of full-time teaching (Shuls & Flores, 2020, p. 4). Unfortunately, COVID-19 has exacerbated the teacher shortage as experienced teachers retire early and others leave the profession altogether (García & Weiss, 2020).

Importance of Employee Retention

When an employee leaves an organization, employers face direct costs related to recruiting, hiring, and training replacements. Turnover also produces indirect costs associated with delayed production, decreased service quality, lost clients, and disruptions to team-based work (Ableidinger & Kowal, 2010). "Some studies estimate the national cost of teacher turnover may exceed $7.3 billion every year" (Ableidinger & Kowal, 2010, p. 4). By retaining current employees, school districts and educational organizations can take greater control of the overall quality of their workforce and organizations. Attrition places a financial burden on schools, but it also negatively impacts school climate, learning outcomes, and student achievement. Attrition also negatively impacts the relationships and trust between school staff and families. Tran and Smith's (2020) research supports the evidence "that constant teacher turnover threatens educational continuity, depletes institutional memory, diminishes trust within schools, negatively influences school culture, is costly, and is often detrimental to student achievement" (p. 86). Literature research also shares the significant negative impact of retention on equity.

Increasing Employee Retention

Recent research studies suggest that special education teachers and paraprofessionals will remain in the workplace with excellent working conditions and a favorable school climate. Ableidinger and Kowal (2010) studied cross-sector lessons for retaining employees from the non-educational, private sector to increase the retention of employees. Through the study, it was determined that education leaders could take the

following steps to retain teachers and other school personnel: make high-performer employee retention a top priority, set high-performer employee retention goals and then measure success, use retention tactics that do not require policy changes right away, enhance the organization prestige in the community to attract qualified candidates, and rebuild education policies to provide opportunities, incentives, and rewards. Some of the tactics utilized in the private sector of business organizations that would be challenging to perform in public education would be higher pay rates for high performing educators versus low performing educators, offering life perks outside the workplace, flexible scheduling, and advancement opportunities as they are limited in the educational field versus the private sector.

Other factors that educational administrators need to consider and plan opportunities to improve retention consist of administrators finding ways to include teacher voice in decision-making regularly, utilizing shared leadership, and strong work-life balance practices. To enhance special education teacher and paraprofessional retention, the goal from the first day of hire needs to focus on helping and supporting new employees to feel comfortable, supported, and valued by the school district or intermediate unit even before setting foot in the classroom (Shuls & Flores, 2020). Including teacher-led and teacher-driven committees across the district or intermediate supports involving teachers in the decision-making process and provides them a voice and sense of belonging in the work environment.

Another factor research literature honed in to improve retention is a robust professional development, induction, and mentoring program, with a focus on a program to build aspiring leaders. Furthermore, another element in improving retention efforts is

for districts and intermediate units to create and sustain successful partnerships within the community, local colleges, and universities. Tran and Smith (2020) noted the importance of employing a relationship approach that demonstrates respect and understanding for new teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic needs. Intrinsic needs are motivational, like performing a task because they are personally rewarding. Administrators' attention to meeting the motivational needs is vital for influencing job satisfaction. Intrinsic motivators are more critical to focus on meeting that need over extrinsic factors when to increase and sustain retention of employees. An extrinsic work environment or compensation motivation involves completing a task or exhibiting a behavior because of external causes, such as avoiding punishment or receiving a reward. Through the research study, Tran and Smith found evidence to support the theory "that intrinsic motivating factors are more important for positive employee outcomes than extrinsic factors. This relationship approach, in turn, increases the likelihood that the educators will be motivated to work and stay in their jobs" (p. 90).

In summary, the following supports are critical for new teachers and paraprofessionals to increase retention: recognition of efforts, realistic expectations that are reviewed with the new employees, verbal and written encouragement, clear expectations, and feedback. Additionally, school leadership teams can increase retention by developing a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom. Teachers and paraprofessionals are respected and valued both inside and outside the classroom. Similar factors noted in recent literature rated the most influential component in increasing retention are support from peers and administrators.

Reduce Attrition

Attrition damages a school community in two significant ways; cost and lack of highly qualified teachers in the classroom. The literature identifies the following factors that need to be the focus of administrators to reduce attrition: job commitment, administrative support, and job satisfaction. Teacher attrition and mobility within education is concerning as it has been observed at high rates and impacts the quality and functioning of student achievement and educational programs.

Areas to focus on reducing attrition for teachers and paraprofessionals are the utilization of financial and non-financial incentives to improve the work conditions:

Financial incentives include salary adjustments at entry or during service and changes to a range of other compensation elements such as healthcare benefits, bonus structures, and support for continued professional development. While financial incentives are popular, the literature on their effectiveness at improving retention is somewhat mixed.

Non-financial incentives focus on the physical and socio-emotional infrastructures of teachers' working environments, such as providing adequate resources, resolving facilities concerns, and creating a collaborative school culture. In particular, new teacher induction and mentoring programs are critical to retaining new hires, as are programs that support teacher engagement (Hanover Research, 2017, p. 6).

Hanover Research (2017) and Tran and Smith (2020) research both found evidence to support the theory that intrinsic motivating factors are more important for positive employee outcomes than extrinsic factors. Another study reviewed 120 years of research across 92 quantitative studies and found a weak relationship between salary and

job satisfaction (a frequently perceived antecedent to retention) (Judge et al., 2010 as cited in Tran & Smith, 2020, p. 9). Educational administrators need to focus their attention on non-financial factors and intrinsic motivators to increase employee retention.

Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers are in high demand; however, there appears to be a revolving door for recruiting and sustainable retention of these educators from a national perspective (Billingsley, 2010). Some of the factors contributing to special education teacher attrition can include personal reasons as well as issues related to the working environment, lack of administrative support, autonomy, class size, accountability policies, availability of mentoring, and induction programs or not being paid enough for the work that they do. An *Education Week* survey of educators clarifies vital factors influencing whether teachers stay with or leave their current professions: 18% requested improved leadership support, 17% cited salary considerations, and 17% named enhanced school climate. By focusing on teacher needs, districts can better retain staff when open positions are becoming increasingly harder to fill (Viadero, 2021). Chronic work problems interfere with teachers' effectiveness and add stress, reduce job satisfaction, and contribute to attrition (Billingsley, 2010, p. 41). Shuls and Flore's (2020) study supports Billingsley's findings that unwelcome school cultures, lack of resources, and unrealistic expectations also lead to increased teachers' attrition. Literature research on burnout and attrition of special education teachers attributes low job satisfaction and administrative support as two major attrition factors. Teachers reported that the lack of organizational support could be attributed to stress and exhaustion (Bozonelos, 2008). New special educators struggle in three major areas: a) problems with inclusion,

collaboration, and interactions with adults; b) pedagogical concerns; and c) difficulties managing roles (Billingsley, 2010, p. 42).

Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals are an integral part of special education classrooms and help to facilitate positive learning outcomes for students with disabilities. The state special education regulations state, an instructional paraprofessional is defined as a school employee who works under the direction of a certificated staff member to support and assist in providing instructional programs and services to children with disabilities or eligible young children (22 PA Code §§ 14.105(a) and 711.5(d)). The support and assistance provided by a paraprofessional may include one-on-one or group review of material taught by certificated staff, classroom management, and implementation of positive behavior support plans. Services may be provided in a special education class, regular education class, or other instructional settings as provided in the student's IEP (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2015).

Biggs et al. (2019) share that "the number of paraprofessionals in public schools has grown exponentially over the last 50 years—from fewer than 10,000 in the 1960s to more than 400,000 presently" (p. 116). The primary reason paraprofessionals leave their job is to seek careers that offer higher salaries and greater career advancement. Retention of paraprofessionals is linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition for their contributions (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Employee Onboarding Programs

In addition to the special education teacher shortage, onboarding has been defined as a process whereby new employees gain knowledge, skills, and behaviors to assimilate

within the organization (Jakubik et al., 2017). New special education teachers are also reluctant to seek help from veteran colleagues and administrators, which leads to the importance of a supportive onboarding process and a sense of belonging and engagement within the school district or intermediate unit climate. Research literature notes that new special education teachers need information about the school, district, and details about special education paperwork and procedures, referral, placement, and reevaluation (Griffin, 2010). Tran and Smith (2020) research study noted the need for an employee experience approach that starts with empathizing with the needs of the employee, based on the understanding that satisfied employees become more engaged with the organization and are more motivated to go beyond the call of duty to accomplish the organization's missions and goals (p. 87).

The first step of the school employer's employee experience is to empathize the employee needs across the teacher career span with the organization; the second step is to identify possible solutions to those needs, and the third step is to map those solutions to the decision points or moments that matter across the teacher career journey (Tran & Smith, 2020, p. 88).

Elements of Comprehensive Onboarding Programs

Billingsley discusses the importance of finding a match between the position and the hired candidate at the start of the hiring process to increase retention. Billingsley (2010) shares:

There are differences between centralized and decentralized hiring processes in achieving a good teacher-school match. He suggests that applicants receive minimal information about specific positions in more centralized hiring processes.

Therefore, have less information to determine the extent to which possible

positions match their preparation, training, skills, and expertise. In contrast, he

suggests that individuals within schools make the hiring decisions in

decentralizing hiring. Administrators and teachers tend to pay greater attention to

the extent to which candidates fit particular positions and the needs and culture of

the specific settings in which they will work. By interacting with individuals from

the school, teacher applicants have an opportunity to learn more about the school,

the expectations, and the extent to which they think the setting is a good match for

them. (p. 43)

Recruitment

The inability to recruit special education teachers and paraprofessionals into the

education system is one of the critical issues currently facing school districts and

intermediate units. At the same time, the attrition rate is also increasing steadily due to

the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2017 survey of a nationally representative sample of more

than 500 K-12 teachers asked educators what districts should do differently to find and

hire high-quality teachers; 26% replied that districts should offer more professional

autonomy, greater respect, and better working conditions, while 17% requested that

schools provide mentoring, support, and training (Viadero, 2021).

According to Hanover Research (2017), the following are essential factors in

recruiting: district marketing must advertise the "best true story" of the educational

agencies' vision while appealing to what potential candidates value. Effective marketing

should clarify districts' material and non-material incentives, such as salary and benefits,

classroom autonomy, and professional growth opportunities. Recruiters should use a

variety of media channels available to increase the awareness of career opportunities, including social media.

Another study perspective on recruitment efforts is to generate positive non-hires. Developing positive non-hires refers to applicants who are turned down for a job and may later become the organization's employees. The non-hires might also be future customers, either as individuals or as employees of suppliers, customers, or partners. The study noted that the non-hires would take the hiring experience with them long into the future, so the more positive an organization can make the process and initial rejection, the more likely benefits are to accrue down the line (Ableidinger & Kowal, 2010). Several studies also noted that many schools would groom and recruit talented paraprofessionals working on campus to be classroom teachers upon completion of a teacher preparation program as part of their recruitment efforts. This practice also supports retention efforts by providing growth opportunities and salary increases for dedicated paraprofessionals.

Induction Program

A comprehensive teacher induction program requires school wide strategies to foster a community of practices and create conditions for effective teaching and learning, in addition to the direct work of principals, mentors, and colleagues with new teachers (Hanover Research, 2021). Through literature review, the following components are essential for an effective and meaningful induction program: high-performing instructional mentors, effective administrators, multiple support structures, and routine program evaluation. Recent research on teacher induction programs favors more extended and in-depth approaches. Models for approaching teaching induction have shifted since the mid-1980s.

Prior and up to 1986, it consisted of largely informal and loosely-organized programs focused on the needs of new teachers and their well-being. Induction focused on preventing attrition from the profession, boosting teacher competence, and increasing satisfaction with teaching. Between 1986 and 1989, teacher induction focused on mentorship and began to include observation and professional development. 1990 to 1996, induction programs began to include formative assessment, particularly in state-mandated inductions. Mentoring was still the basis for most programs, but professional development became increasingly significant. Since 1996, induction programs have become characterized by a "comprehensive, organized system of novice teacher assistance and assessment using multiple strategies." These programs provide more extensive mentoring, professional development, and formative assessment (Hanover Research, 2012, as cited in Wood & Stanulis, 2009, pp. 2-3).

Recent research-based definitions of teacher induction consist of the following:

- Wood and Stanulis (2009) define quality teacher induction as "the multi-faceted process of teacher development and learning-to-teach through an organized, professional development program of educative mentor support and formative assessment."

- Fulton et al. (2005), in a National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) report assert that induction should include "a network of supports, people, and processes that are all focused on assuring that novices become effective in their work," further noting that induction "is both a phase—a set period of time—and a network of relationships."

- Breaux and Wong (2003) provide a more explicit definition of induction

focused on goals, stating that induction is a structured training program that must begin before the first day of school and continue for two or more years. The fundamental purposes of new teacher induction programs are to provide instruction in classroom management and effective teaching techniques, reduce the difficulty of the transition into teaching, and maximize the retention rate of highly qualified teachers (Hanover Research, 2012, p. 4).

Teacher induction is designed to meet several goals, such as "supporting new teachers' transition into teaching, increasing teachers' effectiveness, improving student achievement, and reducing the high proportion of teachers who leave during the early career period" (Sindelar et al., 2010, p. 15). New special education teachers deliver induction programs through both formal and informal approaches. Formal approaches of support may include structured induction programs, scheduled meetings, and arranged observations with mentors. Informal support consists of unscheduled meetings with mentors and colleagues, unannounced classroom visits, handwritten notes to check in on a new special education teacher who is struggling and joining school activities together (Griffin, 2010). Teachers who participate in induction programs have stated that they attain a higher level of job satisfaction, a more substantial commitment to their field, and are more likely to continue in education. Research also notes the importance of induction programs identifying and training effective mentors. Mentor selection is most effective when the selection process and tool is utilized across the district, or intermediate unit that identifies teachers with the skills needed to support adult learners and administrators are trained on the selection process and use of the tool to select strong, supportive, and invested mentors. Hanover Research (2021) noted Figure 1, *Teacher Induction Supports,*

to illustrate the interaction of administrators, mentors, and staff supports to support new teachers in a beginning teacher induction program to create multiple systems of support.

Figure 1

Teacher Induction Supports

Figure 1.1: Teacher Induction Supports
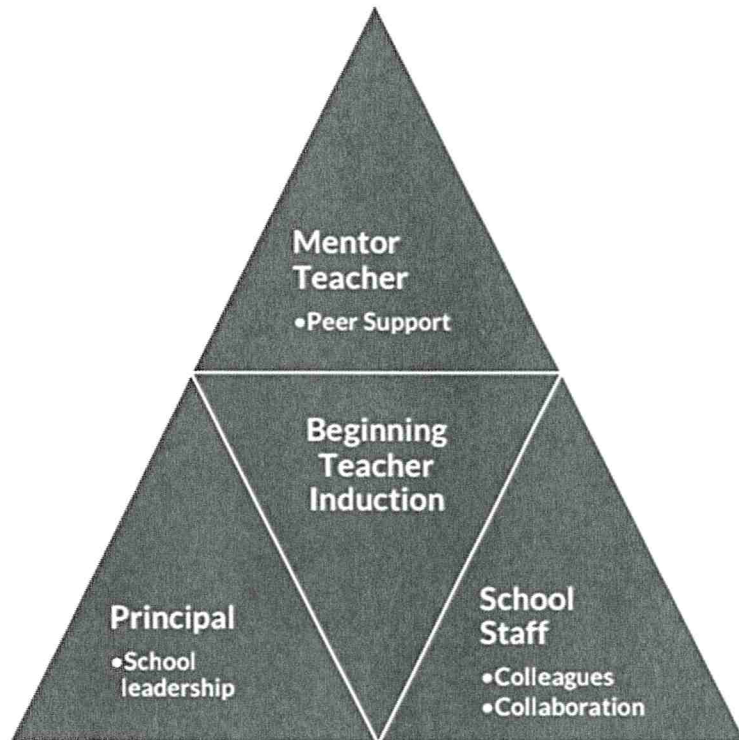
Mentor Programs

Studies on induction and mentoring suggest that well-developed mentoring programs for new professionals can contribute to the quality of a teacher's practice, not merely their retention in the profession. Moreover, some would say that an education system's commitment to an ongoing, comprehensive mentoring program could go a long way toward achieving the broader potential of mentorship in education. A mentoring program could build the instructional leadership of veteran teachers who serve as

mentors, thus serving a career enhancement purpose, and engage all educators in ongoing professional development and program innovation toward the ultimate improvement of the educational program.

A study conducted by Bozoneles (2008) found that new special education teachers found it more important to have a mentor in special education than to have an in-house mentor from general education. The study also found that weekly contact between mentor and mentee in an informal setting was reported by participants as more effective than having less frequent contact and formal meeting structures. Sindelar et al. (2010) proposed through research the following four priorities:

Studies of new special educators' pedagogical knowledge and practices, the nature of mentor-mentee interactions and how they influence special educators' practice, the use of e-mentoring and online professional communities of support, and the work contexts that facilitate special educators' work and increase their retention (p. 16).

Mentoring programs that combine professional development activities specifically targeted to new teachers' learning needs with opportunities for new teachers to observe a highly effective mentor's classroom practices and receive social and emotional support are effective by supporting new teachers to adjust to the emotional and mental health demands of the job which can lead to reducing burnout and attrition.

In summary, a systematic plan including goals and expectations for the role of assessment and evaluation of mentoring programs should be developed before programs are implemented. In order to support effective mentoring, districts should clearly define mentors' duties, focus on the individualized needs of the beginning teachers, and support the emotional well-being of the new teacher (Hanover Research, 2021).

Role of Leadership

Educational leaders support comprehensive induction programs through their work with new teachers, mentor teachers, and program leaders, as well as through their overall school leadership. Educational leaders need to form formal and informal relationships with mentors and new teachers to be part of the induction process. A formal duty of the administrator is to define the roles and responsibilities and identify appropriate scheduling time to allow the mentor and new teacher the needed time. Informal supports are through day-to-day interactions and being available when needed. Research also highlights the importance and positive impact of administrators who engage supportively with new teachers outside the evaluative context to address new teachers' concerns and support them in the transition to classroom teaching (Hanover Research, 2021). According to multiple research sources, some key areas of focus for administrators to support new teachers include: frequently touching base, keeping an open-door policy so that new teachers feel comfortable discussing concerns, helping new teachers to build relationships with colleagues, and observing classes regularly and offering constructive feedback, helping to access appropriate professional development opportunities, and helping with classroom management and discipline issues.

Viadero's (2021) research notes a 2017 survey completed by Education Week Research Center that consists of a nationally representative group of 500 teachers suggest that leadership is maybe even more important than salary in keeping teachers on the job. Eighteen percent of respondents saw leadership as a critical factor in deciding whether to go or stay on the job, while 17 percent cited salary considerations. School climate was

also named by 17 percent of teacher-respondents. School leaders' focus needs to be on enabling special education teachers and paraprofessionals to focus on teaching and student engagement when making decisions on what is the primary need when planning. Ansley et al. (2019) also emphasized the importance of administrative presence and support for enforcing student behaviors, providing constructive feedback, fair evaluations, and allowing teacher autonomy. Through the review of current literature, special education teachers' and paraprofessionals' perceptions of administration greatly influence their job satisfaction. School administrators who communicate effectively, value input, are highly visible around the school, frequently visit all classrooms, and encourage all to discuss school matters with them to build a positive and trusting work climate. Leaders need to foster a sense of camaraderie and respect among members of the school, district, or intermediate unit.

Outcomes from Robinson et al. (2019) research study on the relationship between special education burnout and job satisfaction is the need to focus and deliver pre-service educational programs on preparing future administrators and evaluate whether they are providing administrators with enough knowledge about special education and stress management strategies to help support new special education teachers. Second, administrators need to provide positive reinforcement and rewards to the special education teachers to help alleviate self-doubt and instill commitment and motivation. Sindelar et al. (2010) also shared through their literature the importance of administrators to "learn more about the knowledge, beliefs, practices, and induction of minimally prepared special education teachers and models to make changes to induction programs to meet the supports needed" (p. 14).

Management of Induction Programs

At the state level, induction standards help states ensure consistent implementation and management of programs across districts and communicate a statewide vision for effective induction. However, through literature review, state mandates, standards, and guidelines vary widely, primarily because induction is typically viewed as an internal district or school matter. Since 1987, school districts, intermediate units, charter schools, and area vocational-technical schools in Pennsylvania have been required by the Pennsylvania Code of 1949 (22 Pa. Code §49.16 and §49.83) to have a state-approved teacher induction plan for first-year teachers. 22 Pa. Code §49.16(c) states that the induction plan shall reflect a mentor relationship between the first-year teacher, long-term substitute or educational specialist, teacher educator, and the induction team. According to 22 Pa. Code §49.16(d), criteria for approval of the induction plan must include induction activities that focus on teaching diverse learners in inclusive settings. Diverse learners include English Learners and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP). Management at the state level includes the following overarching guideline:

Each school entity shall submit to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) for approval a plan for the induction experience for first-year teachers (including teachers in prekindergarten programs, when offered), long-term substitutes who are hired for a position for 45 days or more, and educational specialists. The length of the induction program must be a minimum of one school year; however, the school entity may choose a more extended district's that period. The regulations require that induction plans be updated every six years. (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of

Education, 2019, p. 1). According to research conducted by Hanover Research (2021) districts and intermediates need to develop professional development plans for mentoring across the district or intermediate unit. Educational leaders must also address any structural barriers to mentoring, such as scheduling challenges and time available and dedicated for the mentor and new teacher. Checklists should be generated for mentors to follow as a guide. Research emphasizes the importance of progress monitoring and program evaluation to maintain and make improvements in best practices and accountability of induction programs to support new teachers. Formative and summative evaluation techniques should be incorporated into the evaluation process. According to Hanover Research (2021), summative program evaluations should focus on the goals established at the start of the program. The formative evaluation examines the actions and resources identified as necessary to meet program goals. Multiple data sources to measure both processes and outcomes need to be in place. Multiple data sources can consist of interviews, focus groups, surveys, a review of artifacts, and observations. Hanover Research also identify quantitative outcomes data such as retention rates and student achievement data can be particularly valuable for measuring an induction program's impact. Districts and intermediates can also use exit interviews to collect more qualitative data on the relationship between induction programs and retention outcomes (p.23).

Material and Resources

Excellent and easily accessible online resources exist that provide mentors and mentees with material relevant to many aspects of teachers' work responsibilities in the areas of academic instruction, classroom management, behavioral strategies, and student

engagement. The incorporation of technology, the internet, and apps allow districts and intermediates to build online communities of support for educators to provide support and encouragement with each other without leaving their classrooms. Web-based resources and platforms that were designed, developed, and tested for preservice and professional development purposes are easily accessible along with a variety of choices. Mentoring is a crucial resource that needs to be carefully planned and selected. One goal of any mentoring program should be to match new teachers and mentors appropriately to provide the greatest amount of support (White & Mason, 2006). "Mentoring effectiveness was impacted by whether the mentor and new teacher were teaching in the same building, teaching the same type of students, teaching at the same grade level, and the level of administrative support they received" (White & Mason, 2006, p. 198). Literature suggests that the most influential mentors to new special education teachers are special educators. The Standards Aligned System (SAS), developed by PDE, is a comprehensive, research-based resource to improve student achievement. SAS identifies six elements that impact student achievement: Standards, Assessments, Curriculum Framework, Instruction, Materials and Resources, and Safe and Supportive Schools. Schools and educators across Pennsylvania are supported in their efforts to integrate SAS into the classroom by PDE's SAS portal at www.pdesas.org. The SAS portal is designed to organize and deliver educational content carefully aligned to the Pennsylvania Academic Standards and provide educators with integrated classroom tools to enhance their teaching effectiveness. The SAS portal also provides Pennsylvania educators with leading-edge networking technologies that create opportunities to communicate and collaborate with peers across the commonwealth. "Effective professional development,

beginning with aligned induction activities, will help prepare new teachers to utilize the SAS framework, along with student performance data, improve student achievement, and enhance instructional practices (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019, p. 2).

Employee Perception of Onboarding Process

Only 34% of teachers say they are engaged with their job, while 46% of K-12 teachers report high daily stress during the school year (McFeeley, 2021). Districts and intermediate units can enhance teacher engagement by listening to and incorporating teachers' requests into school policy, providing training and development opportunities, and collaborating together to co-design district-wide initiatives (McFeely, 2021). In addition, current research shares the importance of school leaders looking for avenues to expand teachers' opportunities for leadership, collaboration, decision-making, and innovation. By providing these opportunities, special education teachers may pursue areas of interest and leverage their strengths while positively impacting their students, school climate, and positively impacting their colleagues. Through research literature, providing emotional support for new special education teachers by being available frequently to listen, share experiences, provide encouragement, and involve mentors and new special education teachers in problem-solving discussions is valued and essential to new special education teachers (Griffin, 2010).

Socialization

Organizational socialization is the process through which new teachers and paraprofessionals learn the requisite social and task knowledge to resolve role uncertainty and become organizational insiders. Successful socialization of newcomers implies better retention of employees, higher productivity, and reduced recruitment and training

costs (Kowtha, 2018). Many organizations institute formal programs of socialization, deploying various tactics to impart relevant knowledge to the new educators and indoctrinating them into the organization's culture (Kowtha, 2018). When newcomers enter organizations, they assume a role in a new organizational culture. The expectations for role performance in this new setup may not be entirely clear to them, whether or not they are fresh graduates or experienced individuals. A new organizational culture implies that the newcomer has to learn how things are done in the organization and needs to build social capital. They also need to learn and adapt to the local norms and values to be effective in-role performance and feel part of the organization (Kowtha, 2018).

Kowtha's (2018) research and literature review support the intervention, Check & Connect, for this research study. The Check & Connect intervention for this research study is to ensure that newly hired since July 1, 2021, intermediate unit members feel a sense of belonging, have a support system, and are prepared to meet job responsibilities. Check & Connect program offers thirty-minute live virtual sessions each month to newly hired team members that provide support, make connections, and assist with any questions or concerns. The presentations are twenty minutes and ten minutes are available for the new employees to ask questions and seek support where needed. Some research studies suggest that professional socialization positively impacts newly hired educators' adjustment to the organization and role acquisition. This tactic is referred to as a social tactic. This institutionalized tactic allows newcomers to gain knowledge of organizational work culture and access to insiders across the organization.

The literature on special education teacher and paraprofessionals collaboration includes the development of various interpersonal skills. These include maintaining

positive interpersonal relationships, developing a team approach, and valuing the paraeducator (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012). "School leaders should intentionally design a supportive employee experience for teacher support as an organizational talent management strategy" (Tran & Smith, 2020, p. 85). In summary, these research studies suggest that professional socialization positively impacts newly hired educators' adjustment to the organization and their role as an educator (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; Kowtha, 2018; Tran & Smith, 2020).

New Employee Socialization

Newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals tend to feel isolated in their assigned classrooms and school buildings. Billingsley (2010) research found that about 21% of early career special education teachers reported not feeling a sense of belonging in their schools. Providing emotional support for newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals is essential for creating an environment in which people feel valued. Emotional support is about availability, caring, and fostering relationships based on consideration, trust, and mutual respect (Billingsley, 2010). In supportive environments, special education teachers and paraprofessionals know that their presence matters and that their work is understood. Special education teachers, through previous studies, also identify collaboration issues with other educators in relation to feeling unsupported and disconnected in the school environment (Robinson et al., 2019).

Practices that Impact Employee Socialization

Creating learning communities made up of new and experienced teachers working together that are ongoing, purposely scheduled, and supported by modeling, coaching,

and solution-focused increases the opportunities for socialization and collaboration among peers. Billingsley (2010) explained that schools that do not have effective methods of communication, time for joint planning, or shared professional development lead to both student and teacher segregation and attrition of employees. Through research, Robinson et al. (2019) noted that balanced colleague relationships grounded in open communication, decision-making, and respect for each other's expertise are positively correlated with teachers feeling more supported by their school environments and increasing retention and commitment to the organization.

Commitment to the Organization

Teachers who reported having positive interactions with colleagues, other school personnel, students, and parents/guardians experienced higher job satisfaction (Ansley et al., 2019). Workplace relationships are an essential component of the work context. Organizations that implement the Institutionalized Tactics (contextual, social, and content) discussed in Kowtha's (2018) research show evidence in reducing the role of uncertainty for new educators and easing organizational entry through social support and mentoring. As a result, newly hired educators might be more committed to the organization. Multiple reviews of current research to increase employees' commitment to the organization indicate that perceptions of building and sustaining positive relationships and greater job autonomy are associated with higher ratings of job satisfaction, lower stress, and greater job commitment.

Paraprofessionals Preparedness and Training

Research studies have consistently identified a discrepancy between the level of training that paraprofessionals receive and the amount of responsibility that is

increasingly delegated to them. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) were created to establish higher standards of qualification for paraeducators to ensure that students who need the most help receive instructional support from qualified paraprofessionals. Most paraprofessionals reported that their districts provided little or no introductory training or orientation when they were hired. Many also stated that other paraprofessionals provided them with support, leading to the hypothesis that systems had been developed in schools whereby relatively untrained staff members were mentoring new inductees (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Another study also concurred as findings indicate that the training provided to paraprofessionals is inadequate to prepare them to perform their duties in a manner that is commensurate with the caliber and scope of services they are expected to provide (Saldivar-Parra, 2012). It was also reported that professional development was provided sporadically.

There are professional standards established that highlight important considerations on how to meet preparedness to meet student needs. "In its initial preparation standards for special educators, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2015) addresses the need to have the skills and knowledge to work well with other adults, including paraprofessionals, tutors, related-service providers, and others" (Biggs et al., 2019, p. 118). Through Biggs (2019) research study, special education teachers and paraprofessionals identified the importance of training on knowledge of appropriate roles and understanding expectations of the roles of teachers and paraprofessionals to create a more cohesive team. Biggs (2019) also identified through research studies that

"strengthening four means of initial and ongoing support provided by

schools and districts: district training and guidelines, shared time, school-based

administrative support, and formal mentor support for paraprofessionals are vital"

(p. 126).

Formal mentor support for paraprofessionals is lacking as a current resource.

Creating and sustaining a formal mentorship program for paraprofessionals has value and

creates the need to provide the time and monetary resources to pay the mentors.

Although paraprofessionals play an essential role in educating students with disabilities,

they often do not receive the same level of professional development given to other

service providers (McKenzie, 2011). Ashbaker and Morgan (2012) identified on-the-job

training and feedback provided to paraprofessionals as vital to prepare and build

confidence and skills.

In summary, based on the reauthorization of the IDEA 2004 mandate requiring

states to ensure that all special education personnel are adequately prepared and

appropriately supervised, IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1412(a) (14), these findings should raise the

alarm to educators whose jobs entail the preparation and administration of training

opportunities to special education paraprofessionals. As critical members of the

educational team, it is essential that paraprofessionals feel adequately prepared,

supported, and valued and have a clear understanding of what is expected of them.

Literature review in this area identifies a high need to evaluate, revamp, and prioritize

professional development for paraprofessionals to increase preparedness to meet the

needs and supports of students with disabilities.

Special Education Teachers' Preparedness and Training

Special Education teachers who are assigned to positions that match their preparation, qualifications, experience, and preferences are more likely to experience success in their first years (Billingsley, 2010, p. 42). Griffin (2010) found through his research of literature that special education teachers prefer content that specifically addresses their classroom assignments. Griffin (2010) also found that participation in professional development targeted at teaching students with IEPs was associated with teachers' reports of being well prepared in both pedagogy and classroom management.

Special Education Teachers' and Paraprofessionals' Job Satisfaction

Higher special education teacher job satisfaction has been associated with teachers' most important working conditions consistently involving school leadership, workplace relationships, and job design (Ansley et al., 2019). Ansley et al. (2019) research study found significant correlations between satisfaction with workplace relationships and overall job satisfaction. For both special education teachers and paraprofessionals, higher job satisfaction was associated with lower ratings of occupational stress and higher ratings of interpersonal interactions and job commitment (Ansley et al., 2019).

A related concern, the lack of teaching materials, was one of new special education teachers' most frequently mentioned concerns (Billingsley, 2010). Billingsley (2010) shared that one-third of new special educators in a nationwide survey indicated that they did not have the necessary materials to teach. Current literature highlights the strong value of teachers' relationships with their administrators and each other may be the difference between staying at or leaving their current schools. Positive interactions

with colleagues, other school personnel, students, and parents/guardians experienced higher job satisfaction (Ansley et al., 2019).

The most straightforward answer, of course, might be to pay teachers more.

U.S. teachers make less than 60 cents for every dollar paid to people with the same level of education in other professions, according to a 2017 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. That ratio puts the United States at the bottom of the more than two dozen industrialized nations in the study. (Viadero, 2021, p. 3)

Robinson et al. (2019) research study analyzed whether job satisfaction variables were related to burnout scores. The burnout variables were emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment from the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educator Survey (MBI-ES). The job satisfaction variables comprised feeling supported by their school, leaving the field, and professional development opportunities. The variables related to job satisfaction were weaker in dimension structure than the burnout variables. The research study also emphasized the need for school districts to start wellness programs that include stress management and relaxation interventions (Robinson et al., 2019).

Straus and Bondie's (2015) research study to identify factors that support self-efficacy for paraprofessionals highlights the importance of maintaining an environment of team collaboration between the special education teacher and paraprofessionals, and job satisfaction had a strong relationship. The current study also found that job satisfaction and paraprofessionals' role definition positively affected their job satisfaction. Paraprofessionals continue to leave their positions due to low pay, poor job

conditions, including workload and lack of respect, and unclear job descriptions (Hughs & Valle-Riestra, 2008). Hughs and Valle-Riestra (2008) research study shared that paraprofessionals and teachers viewed themselves as members of an educational team and openly discussed feelings of equality and respect due to the following strategies were in place: all professional development available for teachers was also offered to the paraprofessionals, they feel valued and are part of the educational team making decisions.

In summary, to increase job satisfaction of paraprofessionals, research studies identify the importance of paraprofessionals feeling respected, part of the educational team, and given opportunities to provide their input in the decision-making process within their first few years.

Summary

Special education teachers' and paraprofessionals' retention, job satisfaction, engagement, and a sense of belonging are vital points of emphasis for school districts and intermediate units. Due to the increase of special education teacher attrition and students receiving special education services, there is a high level of need to address the shortage of educators. The research of current literature emphasizes the need for school districts and intermediate units to use a variety of strategies to retain quality staff to ensure education is provided. Classrooms are adequately staffed by employing highly qualified candidates, supporting employee onboarding plans, reducing attrition, increasing the focus on connection, engagement, sense of belonging, and retention. Quality working conditions that support teachers are the best practices for ensuring teacher retention. Teachers continue to exit the field of education at an increasingly alarming rate for a multitude of reasons. Through the review of literature, there are several reasons

identified for special education teachers and paraprofessionals leaving the educational field. These reasons include job satisfaction, lack of administrative support, ineffective professional development, a lack of induction and mentoring programs, and a general feeling of isolation. These are underlying factors that will be examined in this study which are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology implemented for the research study regarding improving the retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The mixed-methods approach was utilized to address the research questions. The research approach has a greater emphasis on qualitative rather than quantitative data collection. This chapter describes the methods used to answer the identified research questions. The first section reviews the purpose of the study and articulates the research questions. The second section provides detail specific to the context of the study, specifically the setting and participants. Next, the researcher provides a comprehensive overview of the intervention, including the selection of materials and fiscal implications. The final section includes details specific to the research design, including selecting or developing data collection tools and procedures for gathering qualitative and quantitative data.

Purpose

The retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals is a serious concern and a systemic problem nationwide. A high percentage of special education teachers and paraprofessionals resign within one to three years of the hire date. The percentage of special education teachers and paraprofessional that have resigned from CIU20 over the past five years is 37.38%. The total amount hired from July 1, 2017 to March 28, 2022 was 527. Three hundred and twenty-six are still employed at CIU20. One hundred sixty paraprofessionals resigned and thirty-three special education teachers resigned. According to Mansfield (2019), 71% fewer teachers have been issued

certifications over the past decade in Pennsylvania. Educational literature has identified research-based strategies to promote employee wellness, increase staff engagement, and create a positive work environment to improve teacher and support staff retention. Attrition of classroom staff hurts the school climate, the quality of the classroom environment, and student learning experiences, which collectively impact the future success of students and programs. To enhance special education teacher and paraprofessional retention, the goal from the first day of hire needs to focus on helping and supporting new employees to feel comfortable, supported, and valued by the school district or intermediate unit even before setting foot in the classroom (Shuls & Flores, 2020). By retaining current employees, school districts and educational organizations can take greater control of the overall quality of their workforce and organizations.

This research study aims to collect and analyze data to identify the factors contributing to undesirable attrition, inform appropriate interventions, and develop and implement research-based strategies to increase the retention rate of CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals. CIU20 has identified the retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals as a serious concern and a systemic problem for CIU20. The inconsistency of gaining and sustaining a strong, collaborative, unified classroom team and environment hurts job satisfaction. It has a negative impact on student performance rates, staff wellness, achieving a sense of belonging, and commitment to the CIU20 organization.

A review of the literature indicates the vitality of substantial employee onboarding operations and processes, the importance of having a sense of belonging, and preparedness to meet job responsibilities to support students with disabilities.

Furthermore, the literature review indicates the need to develop and implement research-based strategies and the value of the investment in newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals to increase and sustain employee retention. Billingsley (2010) noted that new special education teachers often feel overwhelmed as they continue to learn yet assume the same teaching responsibilities as their veteran colleagues. Due to the pressures and stress, they leave the profession. Paraprofessionals also have unique challenges, such as a lack of pre-service training, mentor programs, and lack of professional development to support the role of helping students with disabilities. The recent literature also identified a lack of mentoring, administrative support, monetary resources, and collaboration among peers and administrators. Stress and school climate discontinuity also contribute to special education teacher and paraprofessional attrition.

For the purpose of this action research project, the following research questions were developed.

1. What is the difference in the perception of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals who were hired within the last year versus currently employed CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals hired within three years in their overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process?

2. How does the CIU20 Check and Connect program provide the support, confidence, and readiness needed to feel prepared to support students in the classroom?

3. What is the difference in the perception of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals who were hired within the last year versus currently employed

CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals hired within three years in their overall experience with developing a sense of belonging?

In summary, this study evaluates the perceptions of the recently hired CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals in their overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process and developing a sense of belonging within the CIU20 organization. Finally, this study is also designed to assess the impact of the CIU20 Check and Connect intervention to engage and provide the support, confidence, and work readiness skills needed for newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals to feel prepared to support students in the classroom and connected to the organization. Data will be analyzed and compared to the overall experience of the newly hired from the past four school years to continue developing and enhancing support for newly hired CIU20 employees.

Setting and Participants

The CIU20 is one of the twenty-nine intermediate units throughout Pennsylvania and is the 8th largest IU by the number of public children served. CIU20 serves thirteen school districts and three career and technical centers in Northampton, Monroe, and Pike Counties. CIU20 provides direct and indirect services to 86,000 public school children across 104 schools, 9,000 non-public school children, and 7,500 professional staff in the service region of 1,200 square miles. CIU20 serves a mix of students coming from urban, suburban, and rural areas. The students served have the most significant and complex needs in the areas of academic instruction, medical conditions, social-emotional learning, and behaviors. Over one-half of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged.

The CIU20 employs 480 professional employees. Professional employees include teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, home and school visitors, mental health treatment specialists, mental health workers, and guaranteed daily substitutes. The professional staff is comprised of mostly newly hired special education teachers. Only fifty-five (55) professional staff members with twenty or more years are working for CIU20. One hundred thirty-seven (137) professional staff members have been employed in the district for 10-19.9 years. One hundred eight (108) professional staff members have worked for CIU20 for 5-9.9 years. One hundred eighty (180) professional staff members have worked for CIU20 for less than five years, with three (3) of them being hired within the past three months.

The CIU20 employs five hundred eleven (511) educational support staff employees. Educational support staff includes paraprofessionals, physical therapist assistants, certified occupational therapist assistants, transition coaches, secretaries, technology assistants, service coordinators, school attendance improvement consultants, and wraparound service facilitators. The educational support staff is comprised of mostly newly hired paraprofessionals. Thirty-three (33) educational support staff members have twenty or more years of working for CIU20. Ninety-two (92) educational support staff have been employed in the district for 10-19.9 years. Ninety-one (91) educational support staff have worked for CIU20 for 5-9.9 years. Two hundred ninety-five (295) educational support staff have worked for CIU20 for less than five years.

This action research study focused on the experiences of the newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals within CIU20. For the purpose of this study,

participants in this action research study will include newly hired CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals from the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021, and throughout the 2021 - 2022, newly hired up to March 28, 2022 school year assigned to the following CIU20 classroom programs: Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities & Physical Support (MDS/PS), and Therapeutic Emotional Support (TES) classroom programs. The total number of staff members who meet this criterion is two hundred seventy-five. CIU20 classrooms are located in twelve out of the thirteen school districts in Northampton, Monroe, and Pike County through an agreed upon fair share plan among CIU20 and the thirteen school districts in the catchment area. The purpose of the fair share plan is to reflect the regulations and procedures that apply to multi-district classes and host districts for special education within CIU20 boundaries. Regulations, 22 Pa. Code §14.444 Facilities, requires the comparability and availability of facilities for exceptional students shall be consistent with the approved intermediate unit or school district plan, which shall provide, by description of policies and procedures, the following:

1. Exceptional students will be provided an appropriate classroom space.

2. The moving of a class shall occur only when the result will be:

    a.   To bring the location for delivery of special education services and programs closer to the student's homes.

    b.   To improve the delivery of special education services and programs without reducing the degree to which the students with disabilities are educated with students without disabilities.

    c.   To respond to an emergency which threatens the students' health

or safety.

d.   To accommodate ongoing building renovations, provided that the movement of exceptional students due to renovations will be proportional to the number of non-exceptional students being moved.

e.   That the location of classes shall be maintained within a school building for at least 3 years.

3.   Each special education class is:

a.   Maintained as close as appropriate to the ebb and flow of usual school activities.

b.   Located where noise will not interfere with instruction.

c.   Located only in space that is designed for purposes of instruction.

d.   Readily accessible.

e.   Composed of at least 28 square feet per student

Groups 1 and 2 participants were asked to participate in a research online survey. The survey consisted of twenty-five questions utilizing Google Forms. Group 1was comprised of special education teachers and paraprofessionals that were hired in the following school years: 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 – 2021 and did not participate in the intervention, Check and Connect, for this research study. Group 2 was comprised of newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the 2021 – 2022 school year. In Group 1, consisting of newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals from the following school years, 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 -

2021, twelve special education teachers and forty-five paraprofessionals participated in this study by completing the survey (Table 1).

Table 1

2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021 Newly Hired Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals Survey Participants

Staff Type	Autistic Support	Life Skills	MDS/PS	TES
Special Education Teachers	9	1	0	2
Paraprofessionals	33	5	4	3

In Group 2, consisting of six newly hired special education teachers and eighty-eight paraprofessionals from the 2021-2022 school year that are still employees as of March 28, 2022 when the data was pulled from the system, two special education teachers and twenty-two paraprofessionals who participated in this study by completing the survey (Table 2).

Table 2

2021-2022 Newly Hired Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals Survey Participants

Staff Type	Autistic Support	Life Skills	MDS/PS	TES
Special Education Teachers	1	1	0	0
Paraprofessionals	16	2	2	2

Newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired within the 2021-2022 school year, Group 2, were also invited to attend a focus group. Two special education teachers and five paraprofessionals participated in this study by attending the focus group session (Table 3).

Table 3

2021-2022 Newly Hired Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals Focus Participants

Staff Type	Autistic Support	Life Skills	MDS/PS	TES
Special Education Teachers	1	1	0	0
Paraprofessionals	1	2	2	0

The participants of this study were all volunteers and could elect to discontinue participants in the study at any time. They were made aware that their refusal to participate did not negatively have an impact on their job performance or evaluation. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study (Appendix A) and did not require parent permission for students to participate in this study because the non-identifying data collected is being administered by teachers and being collected as part of the curriculum. The Research Study Consent Form was provided to the alternative education teachers and administrators to review, sign, and return. (Appendix B).

Intervention and Research Plan

The research plan utilized for this study would be designated as participatory action research since the retention and the recruitment of CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals have been identified as an area that can be improved.

Participatory action research is defined as a collaborative process of action research that strives to identify and study realities that can be improved upon (Hendricks, 2017). The newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals are being asked to provide feedback to help the recruitment process and retention be redeveloped and enhanced.

The literature review identified that many variables contribute to the increased retention rate of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. One idea that was noted by Shuler and Flores (2020) is the need to focus on helping and supporting new employees to feel comfortable, supported, and valued. Another study conducted by Tran and Smith (2020) noted the importance of employing a relationship approach that demonstrates respect and understanding for new teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic needs. They also stressed the need to empathize with the employee's needs, based on the understanding that satisfied employees become more engaged with the organization. Robinson (2019) noted that balanced colleague relationships grounded in open communication, decision-making, and respect for each other's expertise are positively correlated with teachers feeling more supported by their school environments and increasing retention and commitment to the organization.

Billingsley (2010) research found that about 21% of early career special education teachers reported not feeling a sense of belonging in their schools. Providing emotional support for newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals is essential for creating an environment in which people feel valued. The literature review clarified the importance of developing and implementing research-based strategies that engage, support, and provide connections and consistent communication from colleagues and

administrators for newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals to increase retention and a sense of belonging to the organization.

This research study included an online survey and a focus group as the primary data collection methods to understand the newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessional perceptions of the CIU20 onboarding process, engagement with staff, and preparedness as part of the CIU20 community. The online survey was disseminated to two different subject groups. The first group, Group 1, consisted of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, and 2020 - 2021. Group 1 completed its survey in February and March of 2022. Group 2 consisted of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired up to March 28, 2022, during the 2021 - 2022 school year. Group 2 completed the survey in April of 2022. The survey results were compared to identify if the intervention "Check & Connect" offered to new CIU20 Employees positively impacted newly hired staff perceptions. All participants were volunteers and may elect to stop participating in the study at any point.

In addition, a focus group was held in April 2022 to discuss newly hired employees' perceptions in greater depth. This researcher selected ten participants from Group 2 who participated in the survey by choosing those whom the researcher thought would provide the best information during the focus group discussion. In addition, demographic data and examining internal data to identify recent trends and benchmarking retention and attrition rates were collected.

The intervention implemented for this research study was called 'Check and Connect.' Check and Connect is a thirty-minute virtual session offered once per month to

engage and support newly hired CIU20 staff with work preparedness, make connections with others, assist with any questions or concerns, and build a positive and connected CIU20 community (Appendix C).

The Check and Connect presentations were twenty minutes, and the last ten minutes were available for new employees to ask questions and seek support where needed. A zoom platform was utilized to provide the presentations, recorded, and shared the Check and Connect intervention sessions with new employees who were unable to attend and for reference in the future. The average attendance for each session was low. The Check and Connect intervention was offered once per month from October 2021 through April 2022. Table 4 provides the monthly topics and attendance of new employees.

Table 4

Check and Connect Intervention Participation

Topic	Date and Time	Newly Hired Special Education Teacher and Paraprofessionals Attendance
Wellness, Benefits, & Workers Compensation	October 21, 2021 10:00 – 10:30 AM	11/50
KissFlow - Employee Portal & Payroll	November 17, 2021 10:00 – 10:30 AM	6/58
Stress Management	December 8, 2021 10:00 – 10:30 AM	12/64
CIU20 Employee Intranet Site Navigation	January 5, 2022 10:00 – 10:30 AM	8/73
Technology	February 9, 2022 10:00 – 10:30 AM	4/81
Human Resources and School Safety Information	March 9, 2022 10:00 – 10:30 AM	9/91

Student Services Information	April 6, 2022 10:00 – 10:30 AM	13/94

Qualitative and quantitative data were sought. Inquiry data was collected through a survey created using Google Forms administered to newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals in Colonial Intermediate Unit 20. Quantitative data was collected through Likert Scale survey questions. Qualitative data was collected from the open-ended questions on the survey and the focus group. The fiscal implications for this research study were designed with minimal cost to implement. The total cost of implementation was $550.00. One zoom yearly license at $150.00 and an additional eight Zoom Licenses per user at $50.00 equals $400.00. The Check & Connect intervention is a promising, low-cost intervention that is hypothesized to have potentially positive impacts on both the recruitment and retention efforts of an organization. For this research study the intervention was conducted during CIU20 employees' workday. No stipends were needed for presenters and attendees for the thirty-minute Check & Connect program. The presenters were all administrators and the indirect cost for planning and presenting totaled around two hours. All hand outs and resources were available electronically and no materials such as paper, copies, notebooks were needed to implement.

Research Design, Methods, and Data Collection

This study was a mixed-methods research approach that gathered both quantitative and qualitative survey data through the use of the Likert Scale and open-ended questions. The mixed-methods system was best suited for this study because one data source, qualitative or quantitative, may not have been sufficient in collecting the

desired data. This is due to the fact that qualitative data provides understanding in greater depth, while quantitative data provides a more general understanding (Hendricks, 2017). Inquiry data was collected through an online survey administered to newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals within the Colonial Intermediate Unit. Quantitative data was collected through Likert Scale evaluation questions. Qualitative data was collected from the open-ended questions on the online survey and the focus group. It is essential to obtain this qualitative data since it provides the perspective of those recently hired.

The first step in the research process was to receive approval from the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher submitted a study proposal for to the California University of Pennsylvania's Internal Review Board (IRB) for this project. The capstone project proposal (Appendix E) included an overview of my proposed capstone project and the survey and focus group questions as data collection tools. On August 27, 2021, I received notification via email that the IRB had approved my proposal (Appendix A). Additionally, the Executive Director of Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 provided authorization for this research to occur.

The next step completed was to access the employee portal system to create a database of special education teachers and paraprofessionals that were hired during the 2018-2019 through 2021-2022 school year in the following CIU20 classroom programs: Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities & Physical Support (MDS/PS), and Therapeutic Emotional Support (TES) classroom programs. An email was sent to the participants that explained the nature of the research study, the proposed data collection,

the work involved if they chose to participate, and the timeline. The participants were also provided the Research Study Consent Form via email to sign electronically.

The mixed-method approach utilized for this study included three methods of data collection to obtain a complete analysis of the data. The first method of data collection used was the administration of an online survey administered through Google Forms to Group 1 participants. Group 1 consisted of newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021 assigned to Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities, Physical Support, and Therapeutic Emotional Support Classroom Programs. The second method of data collection was the administration of the same online survey to Group 2 participants that consisted of 2021 - 2022 newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals assigned to Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities, Physical Support, and Therapeutic Emotional Support Classroom Programs. Group 2 participants completed the online survey after they had the opportunity to participate and view the monthly scheduled Check and Connect intervention.

The use of an online survey consisted of twenty-five questions, with twenty Likert Scale questions and five open-ended questions. Google Forms allowed the research to capture closed-ended questions from the participants. The use of close-ended questions restricts the participants' responses by the research provides a predetermined choice of answers. The survey consisted of three types of questions: demographic, knowledge, and attitudinal. Demographic questions allow respondents to indicate personal characteristics. Knowledge questions seek to determine how much an individual knows

about a particular subject. Attitudinal questions ask individual respondents to indicate their attitudes or opinions about a topic.

The survey was developed and disseminated to two different subject groups. Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously. All questions included in the survey focused on the perceptions of the newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals in CIU20 (Appendix D). Baseline data was collected in the first question of the survey. Respondents were asked to identify which year they were hired at CIU20. The options included: 2018-2019; 2019-2020; 2020-2021; and 2021-2022.

Group 1 and Group 2 survey data were analyzed by compiling the participant answers and triangulating data from each sub-group. The data analysis and reporting will be differentiated between the CIU20 Special Education Teachers' and Paraprofessionals' results. Since the survey was administered online, transcribing the responses will not be a need. Instead, a coding scheme will be developed for open-ended responses to help track trends and themes that emerge from the results. The survey's themes and trends may form additional questions for the meeting with the focus group in the spring.

The third method of data collection was an interview with the focus Group. According to Mertler (2019), a focus group consists of simultaneous interviews of people making up a relatively small group, usually no more than ten to twelve people. Mertler (2019) also shares that Focus groups are instrumental when time is limited and because people often are more comfortable talking in a small group than in one-on-one interviews. The focus group for this research study consisted of 10 people, five newly hired special education teachers and five newly hired paraprofessionals. The focus group

was one hour in duration. The focus group consisted of fifteen open-ended questions (Appendix F). One question was used for introduction purposes, four questions for opening the discussion, eight-core questions, and two wrap-up questions. Additional clarifying questions may be asked to promote the researcher's understanding of the focus group participant's responses. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded and then transcribed, coded, and categorized by themes. The focus group discussion will help support future action planning.

Other demographic information, retention, and attrition data were utilized as a variable to determine if any patterns exist. All quantitative data included reporting, comparing, and displaying the data using tables, charts, and graphs. The qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions and the focus group discussion was analyzed to search for themes and categories in the data collected. This researcher utilized descriptive statistics to help identify the response distribution and patterns within the data. Tables were generated directly through Google Forms and Google Sheets.

The objective of this research was to focus on the perceptions of newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals of CIU20 in the areas of the onboarding process, engagement with staff, and preparedness as part of the CIU20 community. The newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessional staff were defined as those who have worked for CIU20 for under four years.

There was a minimal fiscal impact of this research study. The research plan for this study was designed with minimal cost to implement. The total cost of implementation was $550.00. One zoom yearly license at $150.00 and an additional eight Zoom Licenses per user at $50.00 equals $400.00. There may also be financial

implications to consider increasing special education teachers' and paraprofessionals' salaries to stay competitive with the local school district to increase our retention efforts.

The Check and Connect intervention is a promising, low-cost intervention that is hypothesized to have potentially positive impacts on both the recruitment and retention efforts of an organization. The Check and Connect intervention can support newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals by focusing on helping and supporting new employees to feel comfortable, supported, valued, and reducing costs for the organization related to staff turnover, recruitment efforts, and training new employees, and increasing an overall positive work climate. The intervention requires limited time for new employees and administrators and can also be recorded for future viewing and those who cannot attend the thirty-minute zoom session.

Prior to the start of the research study, the researcher established the research timeline that appears in Table 5 to ensure timeliness for the completion of the research project. The researcher also provided a Research Study Consent Form. All participants in the research study were willing volunteers and were told that the responses are completely anonymous and they could stop participating at any point of the study and for any reason.

Table 5

Data Collection Timeline

Types of Date to Collect (i.e., qualitative, quantitative)	Data Sources (detailed explanation of the types of data you will collect)	Timeline for Collecting Data
Qualitative & quantitative	Survey disseminated to Group 1(consisting of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021). The survey was disseminated to Group 2 (consisting of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during 2021 - 2022). Survey results will be compared to identify in the intervention "Monthly Check & Connects with New CIU20 Employees' made a positive impact on newly hired staff perceptions.	January 31, 2022 - February 11, 2022, April 7, 2022 - April 29, 2022, May 2022
Qualitative	Implement Check & Connect Intervention (30-minute virtual sessions each month to newly hired team members) Focus group to discuss newly hired employees' perceptions. (Ten to twelve participants from Group 2, who participated in the survey will be selected by this researcher by choosing those whom the researcher thinks will provide the best information and be volunteers specific to the focus group).	October 21, 2022 - April 6, 2022, April 7, 2022,
Qualitative & quantitative	Survey disseminated to Group 1(consisting of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021). The survey was disseminated to Group 2 (consisting of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during 2021 - 2022). Survey results will be compared to identify in the intervention "Monthly Check & Connects with New CIU20 Employees' made a positive impact on newly hired staff perceptions..	January 31, 2022 - February 11, 2022, April 7, 2022 - April 29, 2022, May 2022

Through this study, CIU20 can use the retention and attrition data to identify the factors contributing to undesirable attrition, inform appropriate interventions and create a sustainable action plan to analyze data to improve retention. Through this action research study, the researcher aspired to increase the CIU20 retention rate of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. If organizations can retain staff, there will also be a decrease in the fiscal implications of the recruitment process and training.

Validity

The primary concern in action research is typically the improvement of practice as evidenced by the resulting, visible change and not the study's rigor as defined by its ability to be generalized (Mertler, 2019). The validity of this mixed-methods study was ensured through multiple means. Several types of data were collected from the research participants to answer the research questions. Mertler (2019) suggests answering the following questions from Leedy and Ormrod (2013) to safeguard validity:

1. Are the samples used for the quantitative and qualitative components of the study sufficiently similar in order to justify comparisons between the two types of data?

2. Are the quantitative and qualitative data equally relevant to the same or similar topics and research questions?

3. Are the two types of data weighted equally in drawing conclusions? If not, what is the justification for prioritization of one type over the other?

4. Are you able to use specific qualitative statements or artifacts in the study in order to support or illustrate some of the quantitative results?

5. Can obvious discrepancies between the two types of data be resolved?

There are various aspects of the data collection process to consider when determining validity. One consideration that could impact validity is the response rate. A low response rate could lead to a bias in the data collected. The response rate for the survey for Group 1 is 35.85%, accounting for 57 respondents out of the 159 potential. Due to the low response rate for Group 1, a bias may exist in the responses when the data is generalized to the total sample. The response rate for the survey administered to Group 2 is 25%, accounting for twenty-three respondents out of the ninety-four potential respondents. Due to the low response rate for Group 2, a bias may exist in the responses when the data is generalized to the total sample.

Another consideration to ensure the accuracy of the data collected is to look for low completion rates of either questions or sections of the survey. The Likert Style questions for Group 1 were all responded to at a 100% rate or 57 of 57 respondents. The open-ended questions varied in their response rate, with the highest rate being 68.42% or 39 of 57 respondents, while the lowest rate was 47.37% or 27 of 57 respondents. It should be noted that the open-ended question was responded to at the lowest rate and asked respondents to utilize the text box to comment on if there were anything they would like to see in improving the company's internal communication. The Likert Style questions for Group 2 were all responded to at a 100% rate or 23 of 23 respondents. The open-ended questions varied in their response rate, with the highest rate being 61% or 14 of 23 respondents, while the lowest rate was 44% or 10 of 23 respondents. It should be noted that the open-ended question was responded to at the lowest rate and asked

respondents to utilize the text box to comment on if there were anything they would like to see in improving the company's internal communication.

According to Mertler (2019), four types of inferences are drawn from validity: content, concurrent, predictive, and construct. Content validity measures whether a test is representative of all things being measured. In this research study, the survey and focus group questions were designed alongside the research questions.

The use of comparing Group 1 survey responses with Group 2 survey responses after Group 2 had the opportunity to participate in the Check and Connect intervention would be an example of predictive validity because one would make inferences that newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals that receive information, communications, and connections on a monthly basis will increase engagement.

Summary

This mixed-methods study is designed to increase the CIU20 retention rate of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The methodology of this study outlines the purpose of the study, participants and setting, intervention, and research design, including methods, data collection tools, and plan for analysis. Chapter IV will further inform the reader of the data analysis procedures. Additionally, it will provide a review of quantitative and qualitative results associated with each of the three research questions previously outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis and Results

In this chapter, the data analysis, and results are presented as aligned to the three research questions that were identified in the previous chapters. The results include quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the thirteen special education teachers and sixty-seven paraprofessionals who voluntarily participated in the study. To address the three research questions, inquiry data obtained through the survey and focus group responses were analyzed to determine perceptions of newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals from the 2021 - 2022 school year special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired over the past four school years to continue developing and enhancing support for newly hired CIU20 employees and increase retention.

The data were analyzed to compare their overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process and create a sense of belonging within the CIU20 organization. The data analyzed also identifies the factors contributing to undesirable attrition and informs appropriate interventions. The comparison of pre-intervention and post-intervention initiated by the Check & Connect program for newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals for the 2021 - 2022 school year were also analyzed to inform conclusions and recommendations.

A mixed-methods approach was utilized in this research project through the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative questions through a survey and a focus group. Results from this study provide valuable information that can help special education teachers and paraprofessionals' retention and implement a strong onboarding system to create support, communication, and a sense of belonging to the organization. While

generalizations can be made from these results that could be beneficial to all educational organizations, it is important to keep in mind that these results will be interpreted within the context of an intermediate unit organization. Other educational providers, school districts, charter schools, and private schools may find the results of this research may yield different results based on their student population, demographics and their staff work locations are in their district and school-run buildings where intermediate unit classrooms are spread across multiple counties and school districts.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach that includes both quantitative & qualitative data was used to collect and analyze the data. Data was collected over a period of seven months. The first and second group survey data was analyzed by compiling the participant answers and triangulating data from each sub-group. The analysis of the data and reporting differentiated between the CIU20 Special Education Teachers' and Paraprofessionals' results. Since the survey was administered online, there was not a need to transcribe the responses. Instead, a coding scheme was developed for open-ended responses to help track trends and themes that emerge from the results. The focus group discussion helped support future action planning. Other demographic information, retention, and attrition data was utilized as a variable to determine if any patterns exist. All quantitative data included reporting, comparing, and displaying the data using tables, charts, and graphs. The qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions and the focus group discussion was analyzed to search for themes and categories in the data collected.

Results

When analyzing the results there were three different sets of data collection: the Group 1 survey assessment data, Group 2 survey assessment data, and the focus Group data. The first group consisted of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the following school years 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021, and who did not attend the monthly Check & Connect Intervention. The monthly Check & Connect was attended by 2021 – 2022 school year newly hired special education teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, administration positions, and mental health employees. The Check & Connect monthly meetings were open for any and all new CIU20 employees. The second group consisted of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the 2021 - 2022 school year. The second group completed the survey at the end of the 2022 - 2023 school year. The survey results were compared to identify if the intervention "Monthly Check & Connects with New CIU20 Employees' made a positive impact on and increased newly hired staff perceptions. In order to understand the results of the research study, it is important to analyze both the initial and final sets of data.

When beginning the data analysis phase of the research, it was beneficial to break the survey questionnaire into sections to streamline the data analysis process. The data analysis process for qualitative data can be overwhelming. In this phase of data analysis, the focus was to bring cohesion to the overall study. When analyzing the open-ended responses from the survey and the Focus Group discussion, positive comments were highlighted in blue, neutral comments were highlighted in yellow, and negative

comments were highlighted in purple. From there, subthemes were determined as they

emerged during the data analysis process and were then utilized to further code the text

which helped to collect feedback that would be useful in creating recommendations. The

subthemes were: onboarding experiences, sense of belonging, preparation for the job, and most

challenging aspects from first year of employment. The corresponding codes were entered

into the margins when analyzing the data for ease in the analysis and reflection of the

data. The data was then sorted into columns for each sub theme. Next the data from the

open ended questions and focus group were grouped under each sub theme to analyze the

majority of the same responses to reflect the responses for the qualitative results and in

Table 14, 15, and 16.

Quantitative Results

Comparison and Results Group 1 and Group 2 Survey: Special Education Teachers

The special education teachers were given a twenty-two question survey to gain

an understanding about perceptions in their overall experience with the CIU20 onboarding

process, experience with developing a sense of belonging, and preparation to meet your job

responsibilities. The survey data are broken into five tables: demographics, onboarding

experiences, sense of belonging, preparation for the job, and open-ended questions. Table 6

shows Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers' demographics whom participated

in the study.

Table 6

Demographics: Special Education Teachers

	Group 1 Special Education Teachers n=12	Group 2 Special Education Teachers n=2
CIU20 Department you work in	Autistic Support = 9 Emotional Support = 2 Life Skills = 1 Multi-Disabilities = 0 Physical Support = 0	Autistic Support = 1 Emotional Support = 0 Life Skills = 1 Multi-Disabilities = 0 Physical Support = 0
Instructional Level	Elementary = 9 Middle School/Intermediate = 2 High School = 1	Elementary = 1 Middle School/Intermediate = 0 High School = 1
CIU20 Employee School Hire Date	2018 - 2019 = 1 2019 - 2020 = 3 2020 - 2021 = 8	2021 - 2022 = 2
Highest Level of Education Received	Bachelor's Degree = 8 Master's Degree = 3 Master's plus = 1	Bachelor's Degree = 2 Master's Degree = 0 Master's plus = 0

From Group 1 special education teacher participants 75% are employed in the CIU20

Autistic Support Department and work at the elementary level. Autistic Support program

is CIU20's largest department. Majority, 66.7%, of the participants have their bachelor's

degree. Group 2 special education teacher participants was special education teacher

from the Autistic Support Elementary program and one special education teacher from

the Life Skills Support High School program. Both have their bachelor's degree. Table 7

shows Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers' perceptions of CIU20'

onboarding process.

Table 7

Onboarding Process: Special Education Teachers

	Group 1 Special Education Teachers n=12	Group 2 Special Education Teachers n=2
Application Process	Highly Effective = 3 Somewhat Effective = 7 Somewhat Ineffective = 2 Highly Ineffective = 0	Highly Effective = 0 Somewhat Effective =1 Somewhat Ineffective = 0 Highly Ineffective = 1
Interview Process	Highly Effective = 5 Somewhat Effective =6 Somewhat Ineffective = 1 Highly Ineffective = 0	Highly Effective = 2 Somewhat Effective = 0 Somewhat Ineffective = 0 Highly Ineffective = 0
Overview and Description of Position Applied for	Highly Effective = 3 Somewhat Effective = 7 Somewhat Ineffective = 2 Highly Ineffective = 0	Highly Effective = 2 Somewhat Effective = 0 Somewhat Ineffective =0 Highly Ineffective = 0
Review of Contract	Highly Effective = 4 Somewhat Effective = 5 Somewhat Ineffective = 1 Highly Ineffective = 2	Highly Effective = 0 Somewhat Effective = 2 Somewhat Ineffective = 0 Highly Ineffective = 0
Review of Benefits Package	Highly Effective = 3 Somewhat Effective = 4 Somewhat Ineffective = 2 Highly Ineffective = 3	Highly Effective = 0 Somewhat Effective = 2 Somewhat Ineffective = 0 Highly Ineffective = 0

Group 1 special education teachers had areas of somewhat ineffective and highly

ineffective ratings in all areas of the onboarding process. Group 2 special education

teachers rated all areas of the onboarding process highly effective or somewhat effective.

The Check and Connect intervention for this research study covered review of contract

and benefits package may have a positive impact on the scores. Table 8 shows Group 1

and Group 2 special education teachers' perceptions of CIU20' sense of belonging to the

organization.

Table 8

Sense of Belonging: Special Education Teachers

	Group 1 Special Education Teachers n=12	Group 2 Special Education Teachers n=2
Felt a sense of belonging and welcomed	Strongly Agree = 2 Agree = 6 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 1	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 2 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
CIU20 Leaders are approachable	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 2 Disagree= 3 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree =1 Agree = 1 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
Feel supported and know how to ask for help when you encounter something unexpected at work	Strongly Agree = 2 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 4 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 1	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 2 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
CIU20 does a good job retaining employees	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 0 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 5 Strongly Disagree = 5	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 0 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 0

Group 1 special education teachers had areas of disagree and strongly disagree in all

areas of feeling a sense of belonging to the CIU20 organization. Group 2 special

education teachers rated all areas as strongly agree and agree except for one area: 'CIU20

does a good job retaining employees.' The Check and Connect intervention for this

research study may have had a positive impact by providing a monthly check in with

CIU20 leaders. Both Group 1 and Group 2 identify retention as an area of need for

CIU20. Table 9 shows Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers' perceptions of

preparation for the job.

Table 9

Preparation for the Job: Special Education Teachers

	Group 1 Special Education Teachers n=12	Group 2 Special Education Teachers
Information on key policies and procedures was provided	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 2 No Opinion = 6 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 1	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 1 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 0
Received instruction on how to operate intermediate unit-issued technology	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 5 No Opinion = 4 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 1	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 1 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
Received instruction on how to request technical support from the IT staff.	Strongly Agree =2 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 2 Disagree = 5 Strongly Disagree = 0	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 2 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
Understand the internal processes and structures of the CIU20 organization	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 2 Disagree = 5 Strongly Disagree = 2	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 0 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 0
Feel you have the right amount of information to make correct work-related decisions	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 8 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 1	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 2 No Opinion = 0 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0
Feel the salary compensation is equitable within our geographic area	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 3 Disagree = 3 Strongly Disagree = 2	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 0 No Opinion = 2 Disagree = 0 Strongly Disagree = 0

The results for preparation for the job data is scattered across all areas. This area as a whole is an area of improvement for the CIU20 organization. Understanding the internal processes, salary compensation, and providing information of key policies and procedures needs to be a focus because the ratings on the survey were rated more with disagree, strongly disagree, and no opinion from both participant Groups 1 and 2. These ratings also align to the qualitative data on the open ended questions and the focus group responses. The Check and Connect intervention for this research study did not cover any of these areas.

Comparison and Results Group 1 and Group 2 Survey: Paraprofessionals

The paraprofessionals were given a twenty-two question survey to gain an understanding about perceptions in their overall experience with the CIU20 onboarding process, experience with developing a sense of belonging, and preparation to meet job responsibilities. The survey data are broken into five tables: demographics, onboarding experiences, sense of belonging, preparation for the job, and open-ended questions. Table 10 shows Group 1 and Group 2 paraprofessionals' demographics whom participated in the study.

Table 10

Demographics: Paraprofessionals

	Group 1 Paraprofessionals n=45	Group 2 Paraprofessionals n=22
CIU20 Department you work in	Autistic Support = 35 Emotional Support = 3 Life Skills = 4 Multi-Disabilities = 2 Physical Support = 1	Autistic Support = 16 Emotional Support = 2 Life Skills = 2 Multi-Disabilities = 1 Physical Support = 1
Instructional Level	Elementary = 22 Middle School/Intermediate = 10 High School = 13	Elementary = 14 Middle School/Intermediate = 5 High School = 3
CIU20 Employee School Hire Date	2018 - 2019 = 15 2019 - 2020 = 14 2020 - 2021 = 16	2021 - 2022 = 22
Highest Level of Education Received	High School Diploma = 7 Some College = 6 Associate's Degree = 10 Bachelor's Degree = 16 Master's Degree = 6 Master's plus = 0	High School Diploma = 3 Some College = 4 Associate's Degree = 6 Bachelor's Degree = 7 Master's Degree = 1 Master's plus = 1

From Group 1 paraprofessional participants 73% are employed in the CIU20 Autistic

Support Department. Autistic Support program is CIU20's largest department. Group 1

participants 49% of the participants work at the elementary level, 23% work in the

middle school level, and 28% work in the high school level classroom programs.

Majority have their bachelor or associates degree. From Group 2 paraprofessional 72%

participants are employed in the Autistic Support. Group 2 participants 63% work in the

elementary programs, 27% work in the middle school level, and 10% work in the high

school level programs. From Group 2 participants', 32% have a bachelor's degree, 27%

have an associate's degree, 19% have some college, 18% have a high school diploma,

and 22%, and 4% master's degree. Table 11 shows Group 1 and Group 2

paraprofessionals' perceptions of CIU20' onboarding process.

Table 11

Onboarding Process: Paraprofessionals

	Group 1 Paraprofessionals n=45	Group 2 Paraprofessionals n=22
Application Process	Highly Effective = 22 Somewhat Effective = 19 Somewhat Ineffective = 4 Highly Ineffective = 0	Highly Effective = 6 Somewhat Effective =12 Somewhat Ineffective = 4 Highly Ineffective = 0
Interview Process	Highly Effective = 29 Somewhat Effective =14 Somewhat Ineffective = 2 Highly Ineffective = 0	Highly Effective = 14 Somewhat Effective = 7 Somewhat Ineffective = 1 Highly Ineffective = 0
Overview and Description of Position Applied for	Highly Effective = 15 Somewhat Effective = 19 Somewhat Ineffective = 9 Highly Ineffective = 2	Highly Effective = 9 Somewhat Effective = 12 Somewhat Ineffective = 1 Highly Ineffective = 0
Review of Contract	Highly Effective = 15 Somewhat Effective = 20 Somewhat Ineffective = 7 Highly Ineffective = 3	Highly Effective = 7 Somewhat Effective = 2 Somewhat Ineffective = 12 Highly Ineffective = 1
Review of Benefits Package	Highly Effective = 20 Somewhat Effective = 16 Somewhat Ineffective = 7 Highly Ineffective = 2	Highly Effective = 10 Somewhat Effective = 7 Somewhat Ineffective = 4 Highly Ineffective = 1

Group 1 and 2 scores are mostly comparable to each other. The one area that the

percentage decreased in Group 2 compared to Group 1 is the application process. This

may be a decrease in rating due the changing the process to completely virtual with no in-

person contact. The Check and Connect intervention for this research study covered

review of contract and benefits package but had minimal impact on changing the scores

with the paraprofessional participants. Table 12 shows Group 1 and Group 2

paraprofessionals' perceptions of CIU20' sense of belonging to the organization.

Table 12

Sense of Belonging: Paraprofessionals

	Group 1 Paraprofessionals n=45	Group 2 Paraprofessionals n=22
Felt a sense of belonging and welcomed	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 13 No Opinion = 8 Disagree = 13 Strongly Disagree = 4	Strongly Agree = 7 Agree = 11 No Opinion = 2 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 0
CIU20 Leaders are approachable	Strongly Agree = 10 Agree = 22 No Opinion = 4 Disagree= 6 Strongly Disagree = 3	Strongly Agree =7 Agree = 9 No Opinion = 5 Disagree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 0
Feel supported and know how to ask for help when you encounter something unexpected at work	Strongly Agree = 6 Agree = 16 No Opinion = 8 Disagree = 10 Strongly Disagree = 5	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 8 No Opinion = 2 Disagree = 4 Strongly Disagree - 0
CIU20 does a good job retaining employees	Strongly Agree = 2 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 10 Disagree = 16 Strongly Disagree = 14	Strongly Agree = 3 Agree = 1 No Opinion = 5 Disagree = 9 Strongly Disagree = 4

This is the area that the Check and Connect intervention may have had the most impact

according to the results. Group 2 percentages increased in strongly agree and agree in all

areas. The Check and Connect intervention for this research study may have had a

positive impact by providing a monthly check in with CIU20 leaders. Both Group 1 and

Group 2 identify retention as an area of need for CIU20. Table 13 shows Group 1 and

Group 2 paraprofessionals' perceptions of preparation for the job.

Table 13

Preparation for the Job: Paraprofessionals

	Group 1 Paraprofessionals n=45	Group 2 Paraprofessionals n=22
Information on key policies and procedures was provided	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 13 No Opinion = 8 Disagree = 12 Strongly Disagree = 4	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 6 No Opinion = 5 Disagree = 6 Strongly Disagree = 1
Received instruction on how to operate intermediate unit-issued technology	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 17 No Opinion = 9 Disagree = 11 Strongly Disagree = 4	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 12 No Opinion = 3 Disagree = 6 Strongly Disagree = 0
Received instruction on how to request technical support from the IT staff.	Strongly Agree =6 Agree = 17 No Opinion = 9 Disagree = 10 Strongly Disagree = 3	Strongly Agree = 1 Agree = 12 No Opinion = 3 Disagree = 5 Strongly Disagree = 1
Understand the internal processes and structures of the CIU20 organization	Strongly Agree = 2 Agree = 15 No Opinion = 9 Disagree = 13 Strongly Disagree = 6	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 10 No Opinion = 4 Disagree = 8 Strongly Disagree = 0
Feel you have the right amount of information to make correct work-related decisions	Strongly Agree = 6 Agree = 24 No Opinion = 7 Disagree = 5 Strongly Disagree = 3	Strongly Agree = 5 Agree =12 No Opinion = 2 Disagree = 3 Strongly Disagree = 0
Feel the salary compensation is equitable within our geographic area	Strongly Agree = 2 Agree = 3 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 11 Strongly Disagree = 28	Strongly Agree = 0 Agree = 0 No Opinion = 1 Disagree = 6 Strongly Disagree = 15

The results for preparation for the job is scattered across all areas. This area as a whole is an area of improvement for the CIU20 organization. The majority of paraprofessional disagree and strongly disagree with the salary compensation. Group 2 showed anywhere from a 10 -15% increase in percentage of ratings in all areas except information on key policies and procedures. The decrease in the percentage of agree and disagree could be due to COVID-19 impact. The Check and Connect intervention for this research study did not cover any of these areas.

Qualitative Results

Open-ended Question Responses

The five open-ended responses on the questionnaire provided insight into the perceptions of newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals on the CIU20 onboarding process, most challenging aspects within their first year as a CIU20 employee, and identified needs to increase retention. All of the responses were coded and assigned to the subthemes that emerged: onboarding process suggestions, most challenging aspects within their first year as a CIU20 employee, and identified needs to increase retention. Table 14, 15, and 16 identify Group 1 and Group 2 special education teacher and Group 1 and Group 2 paraprofessional responses. Table 14 shows Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers' and paraprofessionals majority themes of suggestions to improve the CIU20 onboarding process.

Table 14

Onboarding Process Suggestions

Group 1 and 2 Special Education Teacher	Group 1 and 2 Paraprofessionals
	More training for paraprofessionals (role in the classroom, student behaviors) during onboarding before going into the classroom
	Decrease the timeline from submission of recommendation to hire and scheduling of the onboarding process to get started in the new position.
More training for paraprofessionals	More details about the type of job and children we serve.
2-year mentorship (The amount of information is too overwhelming)	More about specific practices and tips dealing with specific special needs in area we will be working.
	The opportunity to observe the type of student/s they would be working with before putting them in the classroom.
Better mentors that are more supportive and available for in person visits to the classroom.	The IU should pay for required clearances.
Training on how to create a work-life balance while learning the job.	Services that are available for our use in the school district we are working in.
	Moving the time for virtual check in and connect meetings for new employees from mornings to a later time in the day.
	Having a full list of required programs and what they are used for clearly stated. More example pages on where to find them in perhaps a slide show presentation or slides of the pages.

Group 1 and 2 of the special education teachers and paraprofessionals both want

more training for paraprofessionals as part of the onboarding process to better prepare

paraprofessionals to for their roles in the classroom and to meet student needs. Group 1 and 2 of the special education teachers and paraprofessionals both mentioned an increase in providing supports through mentors. The special education teachers, both Group 1 and 2, suggested to increase the CIU20 mentor program form one-year to a two-year mentor program. Group 1 and Group 2 of the paraprofessionals want a mentoring program to be in place during the first year of employment. Currently, CIU20 does not have a mentorship program in place for paraprofessionals. Group 1 and Group 2 of the paraprofessionals also had a theme of needing more information on how to find resources and examples on how to use them and where to find them. Table 15 shows Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers' and Group 1 and Group 2 paraprofessionals themes of the most challenging aspects of their first year as a CIU20 employee.

Table 15

Most Challenging Aspects of First-year:

Group 1 and 2 Special Education Teacher	Group 1 and 2 Paraprofessionals
	Very little/lack of training upon hire to prepare you for the classroom if you are new to the profession.
	Understanding roles and who is supporting the classroom.
Knowing role and how I fit into the school district school building (sense of community is a challenge).	Setting up and understanding all IT aspects of the job (Kissflow, IEPwriter, CPE tracker, Intranet as examples).
Being included in events and activities in the district school buildings is a struggle for us to be included as per the building staff.	Support from supervisors is inconsistent.
Not enough curriculum resources.	Lack of staff has been a real stressor.
Special education paperwork overwhelming.	Dealing with children that have more significant diagnosis.
As the leader of the classroom with paraprofessionals with many years of experience it is difficult to implement new ideas and routines as a first year teacher.	How to budget on such a low salary.
	The emotional toll this line of work takes on you.
Lack of regular in classroom support from mentor and administration.	Staff that undermined my input and work.
Staff shortage specifically paraprofessionals.	Learning how to support behaviors.
	Challenge of staff dynamics in the classroom.
	Feeling included/accepted by staff and understanding what is done where.

Table 15 Group 1 and Group 2 special education teacher's major themes of challenges during the first year are how to become part of the school district building's culture and feel part of the school building team. The challenge of feeling overwhelmed with special education paperwork, the need for more support in the classroom from their mentors and administration team, and access to academic and behavioral resources aligns to current research in the review of literature section of this research study. Group 1 and Group 2 of the paraprofessionals most significant challenges during the first year were lack of training, realization of how low the salary is, lack of support from administration, and feeling a sense of belonging and valued as part of the classroom team. Both Group 1 and Group 2 for special education teachers and paraprofessionals rated the lack of staff in the classroom created high stress and emotions. Table 16 shows Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers' and Group 1 and Group 2 paraprofessionals themes in the open ended responses on areas CIU20 may increase its support to increase and sustain retention of CIU20 employees.

Table 16

Identified Needs of Support to Increase Retention

Group 1 and 2 Special Education Teacher	Group 1 and 2 Paraprofessionals
	More training for paraprofessionals
	More in-person support in the classrooms from supervisors, coordinators, and mentors on a regular basis.
	More communication and interaction with supervisors and coordinators and paraprofessionals.
More in-person support in the classrooms from supervisors, coordinators, and mentors	Increase salary
	Immediate access to tuition reimbursement for paraprofessionals.
Retain Associate Teachers (It's a revolving door of training new Associate Teachers and building a classroom team)	Assign mentors for paraprofessionals.
More training for paraprofessionals on their roles in the classroom.	Make paraprofessionals feel more part of the team.
	Supervisors can have non-mandated monthly meetings with their new hires so the new hires can ask questions or voice concerns.
	Check in on new employees and provide review of onboarding information throughout the school year.

Group 1 and 2 special education results align with other data results gathered in the quantitative data and other areas of the qualitative data results in Table 14 and 15. The three main themes were more in-person supports in the classroom from administration and mentors, increase retention of associate teachers, and more training for the paraprofessionals. Group 1 and Group 2 of the paraprofessionals main themes were also more in-person support from the administrators

and more training. The paraprofessional group also shared the need to increase salaries, create a mentor program, monthly check ins with their supervisors, and the need to feel more of a sense of belonging and part of the team.

Focus Group Results

A focus group was established to further disaggregate the closed item survey data analysis and linked themes generated by the open-ended survey questions, with a specific focus on their perceptions of the onboarding process, sense of belonging to the organization, and preparedness for their new jobs. The focus group was comprised of two special education teachers and five paraprofessionals that were hired during the 2021-2022 school year. One special education teacher and one paraprofessional were from the CIU20 Autistic Support program, one special education teacher and two paraprofessionals were from the CIU20 Life Skills Support program, and two paraprofessionals were from the Multi-Disabilities and Physical Support program. The focus group was provided with fifteen questions. The fifteen focus group questions are identified in Appendix E. Responses during the focus Group were also analyzed by the same themes of the survey questions: onboarding process, most challenging aspects within their first year as a CIU20 employee, and identified needs to increase retention.

Additional onboarding process suggestions were shared by two special education teachers and five paraprofessionals that were hired during the 2021-2022 school year. Participants recognized the volume of information that must be provided during the onboarding process and suggested to break down some of the information throughout the first year as they were unable to retain all of the information. They did share that the monthly Check-in and Connect intervention was helpful in this area, but they were not able to attend all of them due to the Check and Connect being scheduled during the

school day and couldn't step away from their students. They also shared that the Check and Connect recordings that were shared time out after one month and they were unable to view at a later date. They also suggested to transition the final onboarding meeting back to an in-person process and conduct interviews in-person not virtual. Due to COVID-19 this process was shifted to virtual. The focus group participants felt that it would be more personable and feel more supported. The paraprofessionals also shared a suggestion of creating a mentorship program for paraprofessionals within the first year to have the support and guidance from someone who is in the same role. Overall, the focus group participants felt that the onboarding process was meaningful and staff were friendly, but the process and trainings are overwhelming, too much information all at one time.

The two special education teachers and five paraprofessionals that were hired during the 2021-2022 school year who attend the focus group also shared their feelings and reactions with preparedness to meet their job responsibilities and sense of belonging. The discussion and information shared aligns with the information provided through the Likert scale and open-ended questions on the survey from both Group 1 and Group 2. The major theme that caused a feeling of being overwhelmed was not knowing what to do when and how to become part of the classroom team of staff that have already been together and fit into the rhythm and build relationships with staff and the students. The participants shared that they felt disconnected to supervisors and coordinators with the limited time they spend with us in-person in the classroom. There is consistent communication from administrators through emails and phone calls, but not in-person.

Focus group participants feel limited connection with other CIU20 employees in their departments and other departments if they are not working in the same school building. They also shared that this feeling could be strong due to all professional development, hiring process, onboarding process, and induction program being virtual during the 2021-2022 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The three paraprofessionals that were hired after the school year started shared more of an overwhelming feeling, lack of training, and difficult time becoming part of the classroom team. Special education teachers share that the special education paperwork is overwhelming during your first year and need more assistance with checklist of what is do when and support with creating a routine.

Additional suggestions to increase retention were shared by two special education teachers and five paraprofessionals that were hired during the 2021-2022 school year. The main themes presented by the participants were:

a. Increase salary pay for the paraprofessional group and access to tuition reimbursement once they are hired.

b. Increase mentorship support: For special education teachers increase from one to two years. For paraprofessionals, create a one-year mentorship. For both special education teachers and paraprofessionals increase in-person support in the classroom setting. One of the participants also stated, "Another thought is to come up with practical 'in-service' seminars to coincide with the school or district 'in-service' days. It is a good opportunity to give the time to the special education teachers and paraprofessional something to do during these days plus have a program to air concerns or exchange ideas amongst each other."

c. More administrator in-person support, guidance, collaboration in the classrooms with special education teacher and paraprofessionals. Regular in-person check-ins in the classroom. One of the participants stated, "Retaining staff is always an issue and when people 'gel' within a classroom and work well with others, the retention improves. There seems to be a loss of leaders in some schools and the IU should strive to get good leadership and leaders who understand the struggles and amount of work it takes."

d. Continue the Check & Connect for new employees.

Discussion

The purpose of obtaining data in this action research study was to identify findings that will aid in the further development of a formal, comprehensive, and supportive onboarding process for Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 where staff feel a sense of belonging, prepared for their job, and increase retention of CIU20 employees. Once data was obtained, inferences were able to be drawn and utilized for discussion, and ultimately recommendations. Overwhelmingly, the data ascertained through the questionnaire survey and focus group showed that the participants' had a relatively positive experience and perception in the areas of onboarding experiences, sense of belonging, and preparation for the job. Through the survey Likert scale questions there were more agree and strongly agree compared to the disagree and strongly disagree results.

Upon analysis of all data sources, the key findings identified as a need for further discussion and action planning to put in place recommendations for solutions are ranked by highest to lowest ranking are:

- Increasing the retention of CIU20 employees. Specifically, the retention of paraprofessionals.

- More in-person supports in the classrooms from administrators and mentors.

- Increase training for paraprofessionals to increase their skills to meet job responsibilities and support students' needs and growth.

- Increasing the paraprofessionals salary.

- Extend the mentorship program for special education teachers from one year to two school years. Implement a mentor program for paraprofessionals.

Through the triangulation of three data sources: survey Likert scale questions, open-ended questions, and focus groups the analysis allowed cross-checking of all data sources to create reliability of the data. Increasing the retention of CIU20 employees was rated more in the disagree, strongly disagree, and no opinion quantitative Likert scale questions that are reflected in Table 8 and 12. The qualitative data correlates with the quantitative data with the open-ended responses in Table 15 the need to retain CIU20 employees. In Table 15, both Group 1 and Group 2 for special education teachers and paraprofessionals rated the lack of staff in the classroom created high stress and the focus group participants also shared the impact that shortage of staff had on their classroom teaming and their overall wellness. Next, more in-person supports in the classroom from administrators, more

training, and the need to increase mentor program were all key findings in cross-checking

both quantitative and qualitative results that are reflected in Table 9, 12, 14, 15, 16 and

through the focus group discussions. Increasing the paraprofessional salary was shared

as a need and stressor by both the paraprofessionals in Table 13, 15, and 16. During the

focus group discussion both the paraprofessionals and special educations shared and

discussed that the revolving door of paraprofessionals is due to the low salary and the

need for more training for the paraprofessionals.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, there are aspects of the onboarding

process that emerge as meeting the needs of the newly hired professional staff. Survey

respondents rated high levels of satisfaction with the interview process. There are,

however, areas within the onboarding process that can be built upon in order to impact

employee perception, provide support, and increase the confidence of the newly hired

special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Areas that were targeted by the special

education teachers were increase mentorship to a two-year mentorship training and

increase training for paraprofessionals to better prepare them for their jobs in the

classroom. Areas that were targeted by the paraprofessionals were create a one-year

mentorship program for paraprofessionals, more upfront training to prepare

paraprofessionals to meet job expectations before starting in the classroom, and increase

time efficiencies of the application process

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, there are aspects in the area of

CIU20 creating a sense of belonging that increased from Group 1 to Group 2 results.

Through this research study this is the area that made the most growth. Group 2 special

education teachers rated all areas as strongly agree and agree except for one area: 'CIU20

does a good job retaining employees.' The Check and Connect intervention for this research study had a positive impact by providing a monthly check in with CIU20 leaders and new employees throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year. The Group 2 participants also indicated that the administrators who led the Check and Connect monthly intervention were friendly, professional, and made them feel open and safe to ask questions. It is of critical value for the new hires to have confidence in those who are leading the organization, as this can have an impact on increasing retention of employees and their job performance. Both Group 1 and Group 2 participants also shared the struggle and sometimes fear of knowing their role and how they fit into the school district school building (sense of community is a challenge), and how to be included in events and activities in the district school buildings to feel part of the school building culture and community.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, preparation for the job is an area of improvement for the CIU20 organization. Both special education teachers and paraprofessionals had the lowest ratings in this area. Specific areas of low ratings included: understanding the internal processes and structure of the CIU20, salary compensation, and providing information of key policies and procedures. The Check and Connect intervention for this research study did not cover any of these areas. Board policies are legally binding and become a vital component of ensuring organizational compliance and safety. New employees should be well versed in key policies and procedures so that they are aware of the expectations. Technical support must also be provided to newly hired professional staff and is an area of improvement to provide

adequate training so that the employees are able to utilize devices and platforms in a meaningful manner.

The intervention for this research study was the monthly Check and Connect for new employees hired during the 2021 – 2022 school year. CIU20 values our team and wants to ensure that our newly hired (since July 1, 2021) members feel a sense of belonging, have a support system, and are prepared to meet their job responsibilities. The Check and Connect were 30 minute virtual sessions each month to newly hired team members that provide support, make connections, and assist with any questions or concerns. The presentations were twenty minutes and ten minutes was available for new employees to ask questions and seek support where needed. The Check & Connect had low participation, anywhere from 7 – 15 participants each month. The October Check & Connect had the possibility of 50 new employees to attend the Check & Connect, in November 56 new employees were eligible to attend, in December 64 new employees were eligible to attend, in January 75 new employees were eligible to attend, in February 91 new employees were eligible to attend, in March and April 95 new employees were able to eligible to attend. The focus group participants shared it was difficult to make the 10:00 am Check & Connect time and their recommendation is to schedule the Check & Connect after work hours so more new employees are able to attend. Participants that watched the recordings also shared through email that they were thankful for the recording as they were unable to get freed up from the classroom to attend the virtual Check and Connect session.

Through the quantitative and qualitative data collected and analyzed the following was feedback share about the Check and Connect intervention:

- Positive impact in the area of the onboarding process reviewing and answering questions on the professional contract and benefits packages and where to find the resources.

- Good resource and should continue this for new employees. "New employees don't know what to ask or scared to ask and this creates a welcoming environment." Likes that there is time built into the Check and Connect schedule for new employees to ask questions.

- Thought it was helpful.

- Change the time of the Check and Connect. "Every time it happened, I couldn't leave the classroom. The timing was bad due to being with students, can't attend."

- "The recordings are only open for a month. Make it open the full year so we can watch and then ask questions. The suggestion of the focus group participants was to schedule at 7:00 pm. The participants feel that the new staff would attend.

- Great idea to make connections with new staff and create a sense of belonging and comfortableness with asking questions

Many of the participants in this study cite the fact that starting a new role in an intermediate unit is overwhelming. For some, they were even beginning their career. Therefore, there is a tremendous amount of information that must be presented during the onboarding process, much of which must be introduced but could not be expected to be retained. For this reason, some respondents, in Group 1, suggested the need for additional time. Group 1 participants also recognized the need to continue support beyond the

onboarding process through check-ins throughout the first school year. Other participants in both Group 1 and Group 2 identified the need to provide the newly hired professional staff with a checklist and guidebook that would assist them chronologically with what they need to know on a weekly and monthly basis.

Summary

In summary, the data presented above provides answers to the proposed research questions in this research study. The data collected included a questionnaire completed by Group 1 and Group 2 special education teachers and paraprofessionals, and focus group results that some of the Group 2 participants attended. The survey results were compared to identify if the intervention "Monthly Check & Connects with New CIU20 Employees' made a positive impact on and increased newly hired staff perceptions. In order to understand the results of the research study, it is important to analyze both Group 1 and Group 2 questionnaire results and additional thoughts from the focus group.

In the following chapter, the researcher will reach conclusions pertaining to the original three research questions based off of the quantitative and qualitative data that was presented in this chapter. In addition, the next chapter will outline additional areas that would warrant further research. Lastly, the next chapter will cover recommendations for CIU20 to consider relating to how to enhance the overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process, create a sense of belonging within the CIU20 organization, and increase retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals is a serious concern and a systemic problem for Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 (CIU20) and other educational agencies. Over the past two years, COVID-19 has increased the need to improve retention efforts in the field of education. The lack of filling classroom positions and the revolving door of paraprofessional staff leads to stressors in the classroom by a lack of support and the constant training of new staff. In addition, CIU20 employees have felt the effects of COVID-19 for more than two years. For many of our employees, the pandemic has meant more extended and more challenging hours, making an already stressful work environment even more intense and causing many to question whether they can (and want) to continue in the education profession. Furthermore, the inconsistency of gaining and sustaining a strong, collaborative, and unified classroom team and environment hurts job satisfaction and has a negative impact on student performance rates.

Educational literature has identified research-based strategies to promote employee wellness, increase staff engagement, and create a positive work environment to improve teacher and support staff retention. Attrition of classroom staff hurts the school climate, the quality of the classroom environment, and student learning experiences, which collectively impact the future success of students and programs. This research study aimed to help develop and implement research-based strategies to improve employee retention within Colonial Intermediate Unit 20. Also, provide opportunities for intermediate units and school district level administrators to address and review impactful

retention strategies that are within their control to increase and sustain retention of both special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

The research conducted throughout this study considered the best practices for creating an onboarding process where special education teachers and paraprofessionals feel prepared and have the support needed to meet their job responsibilities and feel a sense of belonging to the organization. This research study allowed an opportunity for CIU20 newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals to share their experiences and suggestions for improvement. This research project aimed to increase the CIU20 retention rate of special education teachers and paraprofessionals by analyzing our onboarding process, sense of belonging to the organization, and preparation to meet the job responsibilities.

Conclusions

After analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data collected during this research study, it can be concluded that Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 does a satisfactory job with the onboarding process induction program, preparing special education teachers for their job roles, and creating a sense of belonging with areas to improve upon. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals rated the preparation of newly hired paraprofessionals and the retention of CIU20 employees as a high need for improvement for the organization. For each of the research questions, the data showed consistent themes of areas for CIU20 to focus on improving to increase the retention of employees.

The intervention for this research study was the monthly Check and Connect for new employees hired during the 2021 – 2022 school year. The Check & Connect intervention was designed to increase opportunities for newly hired employees to feel a

sense of belonging, have a support system, and are prepared to meet their job responsibilities. The Check and Connect were 30-minute virtual monthly sessions for newly hired team members that provide support, make connections, and assist with any questions or concerns. The presentations were twenty minutes, and ten minutes were available for new employees to ask questions and seek support where needed. The Check & Connect had low participation, anywhere from 7 – 15 participants each month. The Check & Connect was scheduled at 10:00 am each month. The overall recommendations to increase the effectiveness of the Check & Connect from the 2021-2022 newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals were:

- Schedule the Check & Connect after work hours so more new employees can attend.

- Schedule a Check & Connect every twelve months, not just seven months.

- Have the Check & Connect recorded sessions available for the entire school year, not just for one month.

- Change the name from Check & Connect to Check-In & Connect. The rationale for the name change was that 'Check-In' might also increase participation as it identified more with we care about our employees and want to see how you are doing. The second rationale shared by our CIU20 Professional Learning Department was that the intervention might be confused with the Check and Connect Student Engagement Intervention created by the University of Minnesota.

Research Question 1

The first question of this research study was, "What is the difference in the perception of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals who were hired within the last year versus currently employed CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals hired within three years in their overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process?". The analyses of data collected from Group 1, who did not participate in the intervention, and Group 2, who did participate in the intervention, on the overall experience of the onboarding process, the results were very comparable to each other. The onboarding process had no significant area of improvement identified. A place of improvement was identified in the interview process and review of the benefits package compared to Group 1 and Group 2 analyses.

Through analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data, the Check & Connect intervention needs to create sessions to review and answer questions about each bargaining unit's contracts and the benefits package to enhance the intervention's effectiveness. Those areas were identified as weak areas by both Group 1 and Group 2 participants. The paraprofessionals may also benefit from creating a Check & Connect to review their job descriptions. Other areas that participants shared through qualitative results were to enhance efficiencies were: more upfront training is needed for paraprofessionals, reduce the amount of time that lapses between recommendation to hire actual start date, increase the special education teachers mentor program from one year to two years, and create a formal one-year mentor program for paraprofessionals. Group 2 shared through the focus group that the communication with administrators was excellent throughout the onboarding process, and their questions were answered promptly.

Research Question 2

The second question of this research study was, "How does the CIU20 Check and Connect intervention provide the support, confidence, and readiness needed to feel prepared to support students in the classroom?". The analyses of data collected from Group 1 and Group 2 of the special education teachers and paraprofessionals on preparedness for their jobs were scattered across all areas. All areas of the Likert scale either increased or stayed the same for Group 1 and Group 2. The Check & Connect made a positive impact. Groups 1 and 2 had no impact as the results stayed the same for understanding the internal processes and providing information on key policies and procedures. The Check & Connect intervention did not plan a session(s) related to the area of internal processes and provide information on key policies and procedures. Group 2 did show a 10 - 15% increase in being prepared to utilize technology, how to request assistance, and whether they have the right amount of information to make correct work-related decisions.

The Group 2 participants who participated in the Check & Connect intervention, survey, and focus group all shared that the intervention is helpful for CIU20 newly hired employees. There was a 100% agreement, a recommendation to continue the Check & Connect program for all newly hired CIU20 employees, and suggestions for enhancements. Some of the upgrades were to schedule after-work hours, so more new employees could attend and add more sessions, so there is a session for each month, and extend the recording of each session from one month to the whole school year. The Group 2 study participants also shared that they appreciated the idea of recording the sessions, so they could watch the recording if they could not make a live Check &

Connect session. Still, the recording was not available one month after the recorded session. Another idea that the Group 2 study participant shared was to extend the Check & Connect intervention to have the supervisors of each CI20 program offer a non-mandated 30-minute monthly meeting after work hours with their new hires. So the new hires can ask questions, share needs and concerns, and build a stronger connection and relationship with their direct supervisors due to our classroom programs spanning over two counties and dispersed throughout twelve school districts in their K-12 school buildings. This idea was shared by Group 2 participants after they shared their feeling of having a limited connection with other CIU20 employees in their departments and other departments if they are not working in the same school building. They also shared that this feeling could be strong due to all professional development, hiring process, onboarding process, and induction programs being virtual during the 2021-2022 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both special education teachers and paraprofessionals felt that the paraprofessionals needed and wanted more upfront training to be better prepared for their job responsibilities. Areas shared for training suggestions were: upfront training on the type of significant disabilities (what they are, cautions, how to support, strategies), dynamics and teaming in a high staffed classroom, supporting student behaviors, an overview of curriculum resources available, and how to access all resources that are available for classroom employees. The paraprofessionals also suggested creating a mentorship program for paraprofessionals within the first year to have the support and guidance from someone in the same role. CIU20 does not have a mentorship for

paraprofessionals. The special education teachers also suggested extending the one-year mentoring program to a two-year mentor program.

In conclusion, from what was learned through the feedback provided on the Likert scale and open-ended questions plus the focus group on being prepared to support students and meet job responsibilities, the following are areas to consider for implementation: create a mentor program for paraprofessionals and extend the special education mentor program from one year to a two-year program. Also, add two sessions to the Check & Connect intervention on CIU20 key policies and internal processes. Another area that stood out as a need is more in-person support in the classrooms from administrators and mentors. This need was documented through the Likert scales and open-ended questions and emphasized in the focus group discussions. To meet this need, CIU20 has already received board approval to add one new supervisor to our largest program, Autistic Support Elementary, and one new Coordinator position to our Autistic Support Secondary program. In addition, CIU20 board members approved the change of four 10-month program specialist positions to four twelve-month coordinator positions. This change will provide more administrative support and increase administrators' time to be present in the classroom to support staff and students, model instruction and behavioral support, and assist with the reported overwhelming special education paperwork.

Research Question 3

The last question of this research study was, "What is the difference in the perception of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals who were hired within the last year versus currently employed CIU20 Special Education Teachers and

Paraprofessionals hired within three years in their overall experience with developing a sense of belonging?". All areas of the Likert scale either increased or stayed the same for Group 1 and Group 2 participants. After Group 2 participated in the intervention, special education teachers and paraprofessionals rated all areas as strongly agree and agree except for one: CIU20 does a good job retaining employees. The Check & Connect made a positive impact in creating a sense of belonging to the organization. The Check & Connect intervention for this research study may have had a positive impact by providing a monthly check-in with CIU20 leaders. There are still areas of improvement in creating a sense of belonging to the organization as a whole organization and in separate departments. Another area mentioned in the open-ended questions from both participant groups was the concern on creating a sense of belonging in the school buildings and districts where their CIU20 classrooms are located and become part of school culture and immersed in all events and activities.

Two areas that the majority of both Group 1 and Group 2 study participants in the area of disagreeing and strongly disagree were that they feel the salary compensation is equitable within our geographic location and the CIU20 does a good job with retention of employees. Both areas are of concern for the CIU20 administration as well. A place of improvement for salary has already been board approved at the CIU20 May board meeting is increasing the professional bargaining unit contract employees' salary from 3% to 4.25% for the next four years. The support staff contract is the next contract to be reviewed, and salary adjustments will be reviewed. CIU20 recognizes the need to continue implementing practices and strategies to improve retention efforts.

Fiscal Implications

The fiscal implications for this research study were designed with minimal cost to implement. The total cost of implementation was $550.00. One zoom yearly license at $150.00 and an additional eight Zoom Licenses per user at $50.00 equals $400.00. The Check & Connect intervention is a promising, low-cost intervention that has positively impacted making connections and supporting newly hired employees to increase the retention efforts of an organization. In addition, each new employee will need access to a laptop, Chromebook, iPhone, iPad, or any device that provides access to a zoom platform session and high-speed internet. Future studies should factor in additional time targeted for offering the intervention for each month of the calendar year to share more resources and offer additional support.

Limitations

In summary, there were several challenges or limitations of the study which should be considered in the generalization and interpretation of findings. First, participants in this study were volunteers from CIU20's Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities, Physical Support, and Therapeutic Emotional Support Classroom Programs. All of the CIU20 programs and departments were not part of this study. The newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals who participated in the study were hired during the 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021, and 2021 - 2022 school years. Only the newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessionals from the 2021 - 2022 school year participated in the research study intervention from the following CIU20 programs: Autistic Support, Life Skills Support, Multi-Disabilities, Physical Support, and Therapeutic Emotional Support Classroom. As

a result, the relationships highlighted across variables are not generalizable to the organization as a whole. In addition, as all participants were volunteers, the researcher was a high-ranking administrator, which may have decreased the participation and fidelity of responses on the Likert-scale and qualitative responses for fear of participating and being completely honest with their answers.

Two more factors that may have limited participation in the studies survey, focus group, and involvement in the Check and Connect intervention were due to the impact of COVID-19. After the pandemic shut down, the 2021-2022 school year was the first year returning to in-person instruction. Classroom staff returned to in-person instruction but also had some students continue to participate remotely. Due to the long duration of the pandemic shut down, students who returned to in-person instruction returned to school with increased and intense behaviors. Secondly, CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals do not have planned prep times throughout the day and are with students all day. Not having time without students during the workday was the main reason shared as to why they were unable to attend the intervention and wish they were able to participate in the interventions.

Tools utilized in this study were designed to analyze the perceptions of the CIU20 onboarding process, preparedness to meet job responsibilities, and having a sense of belonging as part of the CIU20 community to identify the factors contributing to undesirable attrition, inform appropriate interventions, and improve retention of CIU20 employees. In reflection, the tools used to collect data in the survey containing the Likert-scale and open-ended responses provided the information the researcher wanted to analyze. The focus group was planned and participated through the zoom

platform. Given the limited participation in the focus group, it is recommended that the

focus group be scheduled for an in-person meeting with a formal invitation and snacks

and beverages invited to create an inviting environment.

Finally, the Check & Connect intervention had limitations that limited new

employees' ability to participate. The intervention was scheduled at 10:00 am during the

school/work day. CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals do not have a

planned prep time and are with students at that time. Due to the significant needs and

behaviors of the students CIU20 serves, it was shared by new employees that they would

love to attend. Still, they were unfortunately unable to leave the other classroom staff to

participate as all staff was needed to engage with students. The recommendation shared

by newly hired employees and for future use in research studies is to schedule the

intervention after work hours as a voluntary opportunity to provide a stress-free option

for new employees to participate in the intervention. In addition, from analyzing the

survey and focus group results, there were areas such as key policies and procedures and

more understanding of contract language that were rated by the majority as disagreeing

and strongly disagreeing with their knowledge. The recommendation is to plan a

monthly Check & Connect for each month of the calendar area to address areas for which

new employees do not feel prepared and are looking for more information. The

intervention for this study consisted of nine months in total. The areas addressed as

limitations should be more thoroughly discussed in future research. While perceptions

could be explored and comparisons between Group 1 and Group 2 of the study, the

findings did not significantly impact Group 2 results, who went through the intervention

compared to Group 1. There was a slight increase in agreeing and strongly agreeing in

some areas, and with continuation and follow through with recommendations for improving the intervention; the survey results will continue to increase with agreeing and strongly agreeing with responses in the future. If this intervention were to be utilized on a larger scale, one should anticipate similar challenges in implementation. Thus, the recommendation of changing the scheduled time and adding additional sessions may better support newly hired employees and increase participation.

Implications for CIU20

Through this study, CIU20 can use the retention and attrition data to identify the factors contributing to undesirable attrition, inform appropriate interventions to enhance a sense of belonging, and preparedness for job responsibilities, and create a sustainable action plan to analyze data to improve retention. Based on the research study's results and conclusions of the research study multiple areas have been identified for future projects to continue improving the retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

The first future plan that will be implemented for the 2022-2023 school year, effective during September 2022, is the updates to the Check & Connect intervention of this study. First, the name of the intervention is being changed to "Check-In & Connect for CIU20 New Employees". The Check-In & Connect sessions will be scheduled monthly for a 30-minute session after work hours. The sessions will also be recorded and available on the CIU20 Intranet20 site for the entire school year, not just for one month. Through analyzing the data, the following session topics will be added to the Check & Connect: Key Policies & Procedures, Contract Language, Classroom Roles &

Teaming, and Becoming part of the School Building Community. A separate session for each bargaining unit will be scheduled to review and answer questions about contracts.

Data gathered and analyzed through the survey and focus group showed an area of future planning to create a process for newly hired employees to receive more upfront training before starting to work in the classroom. Other areas for future planning based on the results are: reduce the amount of time that lapses between recommendation to actual hire start date, increase the special education teachers mentor program from one year to two years, and create a formal one-year mentor program for paraprofessionals.

Another area for future planning is to provide upfront training and increase the hiring of paraprofessionals by partnering with the local career and technical schools and local community colleges. The partnership can create coursework and field experiences that would take place in CIU20 classrooms and have CIU20 administrators be adjuncts for the courses towards career readiness opportunities and to meet graduation credits for high school students and associate's degrees for college-level students. CIU20 has a chance to be a front-runner in leading education and training for future paraprofessionals and creating a workforce that is prepared and remains in the field of education.

One other area for future planning mentioned in the open-ended questions in both participant groups was the concern of creating a sense of belonging in the school district buildings where their CIU20 classrooms are located and being part of the school culture and immersed in all events and activities. An idea to improve in this area is to work with a small committee from the CIU20 Student Services Department and Professional Learning Department to create professional development opportunities for the school district building administration located within our region and create a handbook/resource

guide for school district building administration to support creating an inclusive school community that the CIU20 classroom staff, students, and families feel a sense of belonging and part of the school culture.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research questions deriving from the research study include, but are not limited to conducting research to answer whether or not a mentorship and teacher induction program that is provided for more than one school term for special education teachers affects the influence of retention and minimizes attrition. Another recommendation for further research is to conduct research to investigate mentorship programs already in place for paraprofessionals and the effect on retention comparisons where there is no formal mentoring program for paraprofessional. Two areas that may be further investigated are the relational support factors within an organization that impact the retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals and investigate and answer questions related to the effect of special education and paraprofessional retention on the achievement of students with disabilities.

After analyzing the data of the number of resignations by CIU20 positions at the end of the 2021 – 2022 school year, the administration team flagged and area of concern in the amount of mental health works that resigned during the 2021-2022 school year and the unfilled mental health worker positions. This is the first school year that CIU20 has struggled in filling mental health worker positions and the most resignations in one school year. This is not the norm. Further research to examine the reason and perceptions that have impacted the attrition of mental health workers would also be a beneficial research study.

An area highlighted in the literature review that leads to high attrition rates for paraprofessionals is they leave their job to seek careers that offer higher salaries and greater career advancement. Retention of paraprofessionals is linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition for their contributions (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Further research could also include a study on examining career pathways for paraprofessionals to support the advancement into a special education teacher position.

Summary

The research study's conclusions were determined based on the data collected and analyzed to address the research questions and inform the following steps and actions to increase the retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The conclusions drawn from this action research study have practical applications in improving the retention of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The positive outcomes and increase of the Group 2 ratings and response after participating in the study's intervention justifies the continued use of the Check & Connect session with newly hired CIU20 employees. Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, which was ascertained through this study, it can be concluded that Colonial Intermediate Unit 20 does a satisfactory job on the associated aspects of onboarding. The areas of focus for enhancement to improve retention are: to provide more support by administrators and mentors in the classroom setting, review the induction program, improve upon upfront pieces of training, and continue to enhance the sense of belonging to the CIU20 organization by enhancing opportunities to build communication, collaboration, and trusting relationships across the CIU20 organization and our local school districts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

Institutional Review Board
California University of Pennsylvania
Morgan Hall, 310
250 University Avenue
California, PA 15419
instreviewboard@calu.edu
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Jacquelyn,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled "Improving Retention of Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals" (Proposal #20-045) has been approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board as submitted.

The effective date of approval is 8/27/21 and the expiration date is 8/26/22. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

(1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)

(2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects

(3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).

(4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 8/12/22 you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu

Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, PhD.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Informed Consent

Dear CIU20 Special Education Teacher/Paraprofessional,

As a recently hired CIU20 employee, you are being asked to participate in a research study about perceptions of CIU20 special education teachers and paraprofessionals who were hired within the last four years in their overall experience with the CIU20 initial onboarding process, experience with developing a sense of belonging, and preparation to meet your job responsibilities. Your participation in this study will help the researcher learn more about how you perceive preparedness and a sense of belonging within the CIU20 Organization. By providing your insights, the researcher will be better equipped to develop support for CIU20 new employees that increase staff engagement, preparedness and create a positive work environment to increase employee retention within Colonial Intermediate Unit 20.

What will I be asked to do if I take part in this study?
If you agree to participate in this study, Group 1 participants will be asked to (1) complete one Google Form electronic survey questionnaire in Fall 2021. Group 2 participants will be asked to (1) participate in a 30 minute monthly virtual Check & Connect program October through April, (2) participate in a one-hour long Focus Group, and (3) complete one Google Form electronic survey questionnaire in Spring 2022. The Check & Connect program has been created for a wider audience and individuals not in the study will also participate in the Check & Connect program.

The survey will ask you questions about your background and questions regarding your perceptions of the CIU20 onboarding process, experience developing a sense of belonging, and preparation to meet your job responsibilities. The focus group will ask more detailed questions regarding the Check & Connect program implementation and perceived effectiveness. Group 1 consists of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during 2018 - 2019, 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021. Group 2 consists of special education teachers and paraprofessionals hired during the 2021 - 2022 school year. The estimated number of participants is four hundred.

Where will this study take place?
The survey will be available via an online survey tool (Google Forms) using a secure website. The Focus Group will occur at the CIU20 Main Office in a conference room.

How long will the study last?
The study is projected to last approximately 28 weeks, including one survey questionnaire, a one-hour Focus Group, and a 30 minute monthly virtual Check & Connect program from October through April. Total participation time will vary per Group 1 and 2. The survey questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

What happens if I don't want to participate?
Your participation is voluntary; you can choose whether you want to participate in the study or not. There will be no penalty if you decide not to participate.

What are the risks?
There are minimal risks to this study. You will not be asked questions of a sensitive nature. The survey and interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable as some people do not like to volunteer information/feedback that could be perceived as negative or complaining. However, participants are reminded that they are not required to answer any questions of which they choose. Participants can also stop their participation at any time without question. While the survey is anonymous, there is a risk that individuals could be identified by triangulation from the survey. Participants who participate in the focus group will not be anonymous to other present members of the focus group.

Can I quit the study before it ends?
You can withdraw from the study at any point by notifying the researcher. There will be no penalty should you choose to withdraw. The researcher will not ask you why you opted to withdraw.

How will I benefit from participating?
Suppose you decide to be in this study. In that case, you will assist the researcher in better understanding the current perceptions of special education teachers and paraprofessionals and positive changes in your work environment by creating a positive and engaged climate and increasing retention of classroom staff that benefits teaming and student growth.

Will my responses be kept confidential and private?
Yes, the survey data and focus group discussion collected from you will be kept confidential, which means only the researcher will see or have access to it. Your survey responses will be anonymous. No names will be reported in the report of the findings. Data will be stored on a secure server and password-protected. The researcher's recordings of the focus group discussions will only be accessed by the researcher to reflect on the discussion to guide recommendations.

Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?
If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Jacquelyn Bartek, at mbar4080@calu.edu or 484-515-9136. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Mary Wolf, Assistant Professor at California University of Pennsylvania, at wolf@calu.edu.
I have read this form. Any questions I have about participating in this study have been answered. I agree to take part in this study, and I understand that taking part is voluntary. I do not have to take part if I do not wish to do so. I can stop at any time for any reason. If I choose to stop, no one will ask me why.

By clicking the button below, I agree to participate in this study. By doing so, I am indicating that I have read this form and had my questions answered. I understand that it is my choice to participate, and I can stop at any time.

- *I agree* to participate in this research study.
- Type your name First and Last Name here

Approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective 08/27/21 and expires 08/26/22.

Appendix C

Check and Connect Program: Intervention

Check & Connect
PROGRAM

CIU 20 values our team and wants to ensure that our newly hired (since July 1, 2021) members feel a sense of belonging, have a support system, and are prepared to meet their job responsibilities. We offer 30 minute virtual sessions each month to newly hired team members that provide support, make connections, and assist with any questions or concerns.

The presentations will be 20 minutes and 10 minutes will be available for our new employees to ask questions and seek support where needed. *Zoom Links will be added as the meeting date approaches.*

Date	Topic	Presenter	Time	Zoom Link	Pre-Event Question Submission
October 21, 2021	Wellness, Benefits, & Workers Compensation	Christina Williams, Supervisor of Health and Nursing Services & Kelly Fox, EBTEP Secretary	10:00am - 10:30am	Click to join	Pre-Event Question Submission
November 17, 2021	Kissflow - Employee Portal & Payroll	Franchesca Phalen, Supervisor of Human Resources & Sue Schubert, Coordinator of Compensation	10:00am - 10:30am	Click to join	Pre-Event Question Submission
December 8, 2021	Stress Management	Preferred EAP/ Christina Williams, Supervisor of Health and Nursing Services	10:00am - 10:30am	Click to join	Pre-Event Question Submission
January 5, 2022	CIU20 Employee Intranet Site Navigation	Jackie Bartek, Director of Special Education & Franchesca Phalen, Supervisor of Human Resources	10:00am - 10:30am	Join zoom meeting	Pre-Event Question Submission
February 9, 2022	Technology	Tom Kalinoski, Director of Technology & Operations	10:00am - 10:30am	Click to join	Pre-Event Question Submission
March 9, 2022	Human Resources and School Safety Information Session	Franchesca Phalen, Supervisor of Human Resources & James Stout, School Safety Specialist	10:00am - 10:30am	Click to join	Pre-Event Question Submission
April 6, 2022	Student Services Information Session	Jackie Bartek, Director of Special Education & Jim McDonald, Director of Resolve Behavioral Health Services	10:00am - 10:30am	Join Zoom Meeting	Pre-Event Question Submission

Appendix D

Survey

Improving Retention of CIU20 Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals - SURVEY

jbartek@ciu20.org (not shared) Switch account

* Required

Please select your primary role. *

◯ Special Education Teacher

◯ Paraprofessional (Associate Teacher/1:1)

Please select the CIU20 Department you work in *

◯ Autistic Support

◯ Emotional Support

◯ Life Skills Support

◯ Multi-Disabilities

◯ Physical Support

Please select the instructional level you are assigned to work in (select all that apply) *

☐ Elementary

☐ Middle School/Intermediate

☐ High School

Please select your CIU20 employee school year hire date. *

◯ 2018 - 2019

◯ 2019 - 2020

◯ 2020 - 2021

◯ 2021 - 2022

What is the highest level of education you have received? *

◯ High School Diploma

◯ Some College

◯ Associate's Degree

◯ Bachelor's Degree

◯ Master's Degree

◯ Master's plus

Please rate the following aspects of your on-boarding/ hiring process:
Application Process: The application process was easy to complete. *

◯ Highly effective

◯ Somewhat effective

◯ Somewhat ineffective

◯ Highly ineffective

Please rate the following aspects of your on-boarding/ hiring process: Interview process: *

◯ Highly effective

◯ Somewhat effective

◯ Somewhat ineffective

◯ Highly ineffective

Please rate the following aspects of your on-boarding/ hiring process: Overview & Description of Role Applied For *

◯ Highly effective

◯ Somewhat effective

◯ Somewhat ineffective

◯ Highly ineffective

Please rate the following aspects of your on-boarding/ hiring process: Review of Contract *

◯ Highly effective

◯ Somewhat effective

◯ Somewhat ineffective

◯ Highly ineffective

Please rate the following aspects of your on-boarding/ hiring process: Review of the Benefits Package *

◯ Highly effective

◯ Somewhat effective

◯ Somewhat ineffective

◯ Highly ineffective

Enough information was provided on key policies and practices within my first year as a CIU20 employee. *

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ No Opinion

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

I felt a sense of belonging and welcomed within the CIU20 organization. *

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ No Opinion

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

I think that CIU20 leaders are approachable. *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

I received instruction on how to operate intermediate unit-issued technology. *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

I received instruction on how to request technical support from the IT staff. *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

Do you completely understand the internal processes and structures of the CIU20 organization? *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

Do you feel supported and know how to ask for help when you encounter something unexpected at work? *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

Do you feel you have the right amount of information to make correct work-related decisions? *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

Do you feel the salary compensation is equitable within our geographic area? *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

CIU20 does a good job retaining employees *

○ Strongly Agree

○ Agree

○ No Opinion

○ Disagree

○ Strongly Disagree

Is there anything you would like to see in improving the company's internal communication?

Your answer

Are there any topics you feel would be beneficial for new staff to hear about during the onboarding process and within the first year as a CIU20 employee that wasn't covered that would be beneficial?

Your answer

Is there anything you think the CIU20 should consider changing about or adding to the onboarding process and training that would contribute positively to a new hire's experience?

Your answer

What are the most challenging aspects of your first year as a CIU20 employee?

Your answer

What are actions we can take to support newly further hired CIU20 employees?

Your answer

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Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

Additional clarifying questions may be asked to promote the researcher's understanding of the focus group participant's responses.

Introduction Questions:

1. Please introduce yourselves to the group by sharing your name, CIU20 Department you work in your position, and your favorite vacation destination.

Opening Questions:

2. What was your first reaction to the CIU20 hiring/onboarding process?
3. What was your first reaction when you arrived for your first day of work in the classroom?
4. What were some of the feelings you had after your first week of work?
5. What words or feelings come to mind when you think about our company?

Core Questions

6. What works well with the CIU20 onboarding process?
7. Are there any components of the onboarding/hiring process that you find frustrating or confusing?
8. What suggestions do you have to improve our onboarding/hiring process?
9. What did you find helpful with the Check & Connect program?
10. Do you feel the Check & Connect program would be beneficial for new employees to make connections with others, find out information about the organization, and ask questions to receive more support?
11. What suggestions do you have to enhance the Check & Connect program?
12. How engaged do you feel working in the CIU20 organization with other employees and departments?
13. Do you feel a sense of belonging in your classroom and school building?
    1. If yes, what items make you feel that sense of belonging?
    2. If not, what areas can we improve upon to create an environment where employees feel a sense of belonging?

Wrap-Up Questions

14. If you had the power to change one thing about the topic, what would it be?
15. Is there anything we haven't touched on today that you'd like us to know?