

RESEARCH

previews

NEW FINDINGS FROM COPSSE

Mid-Career Changers— Here To Stay or Passing Through?

... **M**id-career changers—individuals from non-educational fields (e.g., accountants and engineers), retired professionals, former military personnel, etc.—are prime targets of many special education alternative route certification program recruitment efforts. Outreach to this group of professionals is thought to address chronic special education teacher shortages by eliminating barriers to entry into teaching that would otherwise keep them away. In fact, the *No Child Left Behind Act* provides funds for states to provide alternative routes for, among others, mid-career changers.

Those efforts seem to be working. Today, mid-career changers comprise more than 40 percent of all teachers prepared in alternative route programs.

We can attract mid-career professionals to teaching, but the question remains, “Will they complete their preparation programs and persist in teaching beyond the first five years?” COPSSE research suggests that, in fact, this group may be very vulnerable to early attrition.

“Some mid-career changers have real potential, but others may not be strong prospects,” says **Paul Sindelar**, COPSSE director and researcher. “Rather than focus primarily on retention efforts, we may do better by improving the selec-

tion process—that is, identifying those individuals from the beginning who have a high probability of completing preparation and remaining in the field.”

What do we know about this group of teachers that may help us reduce their risk for attrition? Read on to gain insights from COPSSE research.

Can Mid-Career Changers Afford To Stay?

Many mid-career changers take a significant cut in pay when they shift to teaching. Consider an accountant who is making \$90,000 after 25 years. After being let go, she switches to teaching, where she earns \$30,000 because she has only a bachelor’s degree and no experience. She might be keen to return to accounting, whatever the joys of teaching.

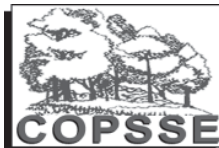
The lifetime earnings profile for many occupations punishes those who make a career shift to teaching. Given the sometimes huge salary differentials, can mid-career changers afford to stay? Economists warn that mid-career changers from outside the public schools can be risky clientele. As the sidebar on page two shows, salary differentials can pose significant barriers to teacher retention.

“There is legitimate concern that some mid-career changers may view teach-

THIS JUST IN

Research provides an inside look at the potential for persistence in mid-career changers, the largest group of special education teachers prepared in alternative route programs.

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Mid-Career Changers—Sacrificing Pay To Teach?

This table presents an example of what some mid-career changers encounter in terms of pay cuts in two typical Florida communities.

	Accountants/Auditors		Mechanical Engineers	
	Dade	Hillsborough	Dade	Hillsborough
Cut in Lifetime Earnings	\$447,102	\$362,296	\$486,179	\$584,531
Cut in Annual Pay	\$43,285	\$34,978	\$47,068	\$56,590
Cut in Hourly Pay	\$16.24	\$12.65	\$18.13	\$23.45

ing as a temporary job,” Sindelar points out. “There are always costs to the district associated with early attrition, but if time in an alternative route program was state or locally subsidized, that investment also is lost.” Sindelar recommends investigating a mid-career changer’s motivation for shifting to teaching. “If the mid-career changer is changing for a *good* reason—for example, he or she has amassed sufficient wealth and now wants to focus on altruistic pursuits—it may signal a good match and a good bet.”

Will Mid-Career Changers Be Comfortable Staying?

Economists suggest that we can expect higher persistence in teaching from individuals who have better job matches. For example, mid-career changers from

occupations that share similarities with education—both in terms of school experience and the nature of the work—may experience a better job match. Economists refer to these individuals as having job-specific human capital.

“The concern is that mid-career changers without job-specific human capital may dislike or feel uncomfortable working in schools. So, it is important to try and tease out those individuals for whom the school milieu is really different from their previous career,” Sindelar explains. “For example, even though retired military personnel may appear to be a good bet because they do not necessarily have a lucrative career to return to, the difference in social milieu between schools and the typical military assignment may be a barrier—not just in terms of working in an environment with children everywhere,

but in other respects, such as the collaborative nature of schools versus the hierarchical structure of the military.”

Economists also point to mid-career changers with location-specific human capital—individuals who live in the school community, understand the inner workings of the community, and/or have strong ties to the community—as being likely to persist longer. “Many of the new teaching jobs are in hard-to-staff schools; however, mid-career changers generally do not live in these communities,” cautions Sindelar. “We want to select mid-career changers who are willing to teach in hard-to-staff schools—and, who, at the first opportunity, will not wander off to another community.”



Research points to differences between alternative route and traditionally prepared teachers. [Exceptionality (2004), Volume 12, pp. 209-223.]

For More Information

Information reported in this preview was based on research that COPSSSE researchers—Paul T. Sindelar, Michael S. Rosenberg, Jim Dewey, Dave Denslow, and Chifeng Dai—crafted into professional presentations (available on the COPSSSE web site at www.copsse.org).



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About COPSSSE

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The research previews are produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.



Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education.