

# Proactively Addressing New Teacher Retention and Attrition During the Senior Year: A Comprehensive Course Redesign

Robert F. Sumowski  
Georgia College & State University

*After being named a 2022-2023 Georgia Governor's Teaching Fellow, the author was asked to identify a course or a project that would be the focal point of his work during the year-long series of monthly symposia that constituted the program. The program enabled the author to conduct a comprehensive redesign of a relatively outdated course. The course, entitled EDEX 4334: Teachers as Leaders, was transformed into a relevant, real-world educational experience designed to address the issues of teacher attrition, retention, and burnout using activities designed to enhance the experience of undergraduate Special Education majors at Georgia College & State University. The result was a reimagined course that incorporated components addressing key issues facing new teachers such as navigating the hiring process, resume preparation, rehearsing the interview processes, handling Special Education IEPs and caseloads, managing paraprofessionals, supervisors, and colleagues, honing time management skills, and addressing self-care in order to prevent new teacher attrition and burnout.*

*Keywords: teacher burnout, attrition, teacher retention, educator preparation programs*

## INTRODUCTION

It is hardly news that attrition during teachers' first years in the field is a major crisis facing education in the United States (Podolsky et al., 2016). This issue has been a concern in Georgia over the past decade, when the Georgia Professional Standards Commission reported that 44 percent of new teacher hires left the field from 2008-2015 (Owens, 2015).

A meta-analysis by Madigan and Kim (2021) identified the issues of teacher attrition and burnout as complex and wide-ranging, yet regardless of the issues' complexity the sober reality for school districts remains that early-career teachers continue to flee the P-12 classroom at alarming rates.

In 2022, the Georgia Department of Education released its *Report of the 2022 Georgia Teacher Burnout Task Force*, which identified five themes attributed to causing burnout among the state's teachers:

- Assessment
- Preserving and Protecting Time
- Pressures/Unrealistic Expectations
- Teacher Voice and Professional Growth
- Mental Health and Wellness (Georgia Department of Education, 2022, p. 9).

The author's redesign of the EDEX 4334 course sought to address four of the themes identified in this report.

## THE COURSE

Within the program of study for the B.S. Degree in Special Education at GCSU resides a course entitled *EDEX 4334: Teachers as Leaders*. The course description and objectives are nebulous to the extent that its content has never been consistent, wavering in direction annually depending upon the instructor assigned to teach the course. After multiple reflective conversations with the chair of the program, the author and chair agreed that this course would benefit from a top-to-bottom overhaul.

After the agreement that the course merited a comprehensive reimagining, the author redesigned it to address principal challenges and stressors facing new teachers entering in the field while simultaneously addressing aspects related to four of five burnout-related themes identified by the Georgia Department of Education (2022). The author chose to address the following issues that influence new teacher retention and affect attrition during the first years of teachers' careers:

- Navigating the hiring process, including resume preparation, the application and interview processes, and selecting one's first job. This was done in cooperation and with the assistance of staff from GCSU's Career Center
- Workload, IEP paperwork, caseload, and time management
- Managing paraprofessionals
- Managing colleagues vertically (administration) and horizontally (co-teachers, adult peers)
- Managing self-care to prevent burnout

Beyond the research base, several of the areas above represented issues that were reported anecdotally to special education faculty by recent graduates as the chief obstacles they faced upon entry into the field. This list was by no means exhaustive, but served as a starting point for the redesign of the course.

## RATIONALE FOR REDESIGN

The course was redesigned in order to proactively address significant areas of concern outlined in the literature and observed anecdotally pertaining to real-world challenges and stressors facing new teachers entering the field. The goal of the redesign was to impact teacher retention and reduce attrition among the program's graduates during the first years of their teaching careers.

In order to initiate the redesign, the author began with the research base, including the *Report of the 2022 Georgia Teacher Burnout Task Force* by the Georgia Department of Education (2022). The author then identified challenges identified during the first years in the field collected through anecdotal information from post-graduation contact with a decade's worth of graduates of GCSU's field-based special education cohort from 2012-2022.

## COMPONENTS ADDED TO THE COURSE

### Enhanced Preparation for the Hiring Process

- A comprehensive in-class resume and interview seminar conducted by staff from the GCSU Career Center
- In-class mock interview roleplay activity with the class as a live audience viewing a simulated special education job interview between Career Center staff and a student who volunteered to play the role of the interviewee. During the in-class mock interview roleplay activity, Career Center Staff used actual interview questions the author had obtained from two current Georgia principals.

### Addressing Teacher Burnout and Attrition

- Evening roundtable/seminars following three student-teaching days were incorporated to tap the external expertise of practicing P-12 special education teachers and administrators for real-world perspectives on strategies for preventing the issues that lead to teacher burnout. Guest panelists

included recent GCSU graduates, who shared lessons and strategies learned during their first years in the field.

- The first roundtable/seminar held in February 2023 addressed the following issues:
  - Effective management of workload;
  - Handling SPED IEP paperwork and SPED student caseload;
  - Time management; and,
  - The importance of self-care and the introduction to real-world strategies for maintaining new teachers' stability and sanity.

The session also included a discussion of the importance of self-care during new teachers' first years in the P-12 field. Two Special Education teachers who recently graduated from the College of Education and a retired building- and district-level administrator shared lessons and strategies learned during their years in the field.

#### *Guiding Questions Addressed by the Panel*

- What do each of you do to keep from burning out during the day-to-day operation of your classroom?
- Was there one watershed moment or event during your early years in the classroom when you feel you truly became a teacher?
- What duties are the toughest to manage?
- What do you do to manage these challenges?
- What are some tips for managing your special education caseload and IEPs?
- If there was one thing (or more) you could go back and change about how you handled your first year in the classroom, what would it (or they) be?
- How do you manage time?
- What is self-care to you and how are you able to be sure that you get it?
- What should you be careful to NOT do during the first year in the classroom? What are common mistakes?
- What else would you like first year teachers to know about what they might expect?
- What keeps you going every day?

The second roundtable/seminar held in March 2023 involved an open discussion of strategies to combat three additional common early career challenges:

- Managing paraprofessionals;
- Managing colleagues vertically (administration) and horizontally (adult peers); and,
- Special Education/General Education Co-Teaching Partnerships.

This panel included a practicing paraprofessional/special education teacher team, a principal, and three special education teachers from different levels of P-12 education to share their experiences and identify best practices in fostering healthy teacher/paraprofessional, teacher/supervisor, and teacher/colleague relationships.

#### *Guiding Questions Addressed by the Panel*

- What parts of the teacher/paraprofessional relationship are the toughest to manage? What have you done to manage these challenges?
- Can you share any stories about conflict you have had--or have seen--between teachers and paraprofessionals where the relationship has gone off the rails? How might new teachers avoid conflict?
- When is it time to pause and listen to your paraprofessionals?
- When you must redirect a paraprofessional, what is the most professional and effective way to hold that conversation? What actual words should you use to communicate any concerns?
- What should new teachers be sure they never do in teacher/ paraprofessional relationships?

- What does a healthy special education/general education co-teaching team look and act like in the 2023 classroom?
- What causes special education/general education teacher stresses and how can this be avoided?
- Do you have any stories of lessons you have learned about getting along with co-teachers?
- What should new teachers be sure they never do with co-teachers?
- Managing up: What makes for a healthy relationship with school administrators?
- What kinds of issues or teacher behaviors cause principals concern, especially with new teachers?
- How can you make sure you avoid rubbing a principal the wrong way?
- What should you do if you get the feeling you may have offended your principal? Can strained relationships with principals be mended? How?
- What else would you like first year teachers to know about what they might expect?

### **Revised and Streamlined the Service Learning Project**

In addition to revising content by adding these components, the author also addressed the Service Learning Project, a longstanding assessment designed to demonstrate teacher candidates' capacity to teach P-12 students the value of becoming servant leaders through the implementation of P-12 student-led and designed projects that address either a direct need of a group of people or an organization within the school's surrounding community (e.g., winter coat or canned food drives) or a project that advocates for awareness of an underserved group of people or an organization within the school's surrounding community (e.g., advocating to a local city council for the installation of talking crosswalk speakers in neighborhoods in which groups of blind/visually impaired people reside). This project is conducted within the teacher candidates' senior internships.

- The author streamlined the length of sections of the assignment to reduce busy work.
- The author made deadlines for sections of the assignments uniform throughout the semester and more realistic within the context of other demands of their student-teaching internships.
- The author then worked with individual teacher-candidates to negotiate projects that would be acceptable to the administrations of their host schools.

### **Additional Components Incorporated**

- The author incorporated the new CEC Standards to bring the course into compliance with new 2022 SPA requirements.
- The author identified portable course outcomes as well as creating course goals that aligned with Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (See Table 1).
- Portable skills addressed: The EDEX 4334 Service Learning Project—a key assessment that lies within this course—promotes the portable skills of civic engagement and servant leadership among both undergraduate students and the P-12 students they subsequently instructed within their Spring 2023 field placements.

**TABLE 1**  
**ALIGNMENT OF COURSE GOALS WITH FINK'S TAXONOMY**

Significant Learning Category	Course Goals
Foundational Knowledge	Identify and describe the steps required in order to effectively navigate the hiring process in order to obtain and then maintain employment in a P-12 school.
Application	Weighing various employment options, choose the teaching position one wishes to accept based upon an analysis of factors such as grade level, school, location, administrative leadership, and the type of Special Education position one desires.
Integration	Link ways schools can connect with external community partner organizations to benefit others.
Human Dimension	Communicate clear expectations, duties, and responsibilities to para-educators with humility, empathy, and respect for the knowledge and experience they bring to the classroom. Collaborate with general education colleagues and supervisors in order to meet and support the academic, social, and emotional needs of diverse student populations, including those with disabilities.
Caring	Commit to recognizing the importance of self-care and developing effective methods of managing stress, time, workload, and maintaining a positive outlook in order to sustain mental, emotional, and physical health during one's teaching career.
Learning How to Learn	Reflect upon ways to develop one's own knowledge base in order to design instruction that fosters empathy for other community members within the P-12 students one teaches.

Following preparation of the course's redesigned components, EDEX 4334: Teachers as Leaders was taught during Spring Semester 2023 (January 9-May 1, 2023).

## ASSESSMENT

### Formative Assessment

Students submitted a one-page reflection paper the day following each roundtable/seminar activity in which they identified key takeaway points they received from our panelists and discussed how each takeaway point would be germane to their individual growth, strengths, and challenges going into their first year as teachers within the field. Following is a sample of student comments following the roundtable sessions:

- "First, I found it very beneficial to have teachers who had previously graduated from the cohort discussing life as a teacher. As someone who started struggling with teacher burnout, it was very refreshing to hear their perspectives on how you can prevent this."
- "The teachers shared that you should try not to overwork yourself if things don't go perfectly. I know my first year will not be flawless, and I will definitely make some mistakes. It is important to learn from them and move forward."

- “The first topic we discussed was teacher burnout and how to effectively manage daily tasks. The point we kept coming back to was, ‘Don’t take anything too seriously.’ This statement was huge for me.”
- “Another big thing they talked about was giving yourself grace. They all emphasized to not get too worked up or stressed if you don’t get to everything you had planned to do for that day. Stuff comes up and days do not always go as planned. It is best to just not beat yourself up and move on with your day.”
- “My biggest takeaway from discussing paraprofessionals is [that] everything that happens in the classroom comes back to me. I need to make sure that laws are being followed and that my students are being treated correctly.”
- “The self-care portion of this discussion was my favorite. For me, this is my biggest fear for teaching. I am nervous that I will get swallowed whole with everything that I do. My crisis that I am currently going through is how to balance my life so that I feel like I am still alive and not be spread so thin that I feel like a zombie. I do not want to get burnt [*sic*] out before I even really begin.”
- “I learned that it is best to laugh about the lessons you didn’t think you would need to learn and just roll with it. Otherwise, you won’t be able to survive the chaos”

In addition, students also submitted a one-page reflection paper following the in-class mock interview roleplay activity. Following is a sample of student comments following this session:

- “I also like the way she spoke about doing a self-inventory. To me, this means thinking about what stories and connections you could make with each example question. This would ensure that I will always have a story or example ready so I can avoid certain filler words and take too many breaks in between questions.”
- “Another question that was helpful reflecting on was, ‘So tell me about a time you worked with a team to solve a problem?’ This was a question I had not thought of a situation to match with.”
- “A major takeaway I got from the mock interview was the importance of storytelling because it shows how you apply your experiences to your teaching.”
- “Reflecting on how Victoria approached these questions, I learned that I need to review IEP terms such as low-profile intervention and legal terms.”
- “Throughout the mock interview, I wrote down tips to remember. One of the biggest tips is to avoid using filler words. It is also essential to be conscious of body language: make eye contact, sit up with good posture, and use appropriate hand gestures. Lastly, I need to remember if I do not know an answer right away, it is ok to say, ‘Can I take a moment to reflect on that?’ All and all, this mock interview gave me good insight into how to prepare and practice for my upcoming interview.”

### **Summative Assessment**

Longitudinal data will be collected annually by the College of Education regarding post-graduation employment trends. Participation by graduates is voluntary.

### **STUDENT ATTRITION AT THE END OF THE FIRST YEAR**

Of the 15 special education seniors who took the course during Spring Semester 2023, 13 students accepted teaching positions within the state of Georgia during the 2023-2024 school year. Of these 13 new teachers, all reported to the author that they had been offered and accepted contracts to continue teaching during the 2024-2025 school year.

Only one year removed from experiencing the redesigned course, longitudinal data on the effect of the experiences within the course is not yet available, however the researcher will continue to track these graduates as they progress during their post-graduation years to ascertain how many of them remain in the teaching profession over time. Of course, there are myriad influences and extraneous variables that

influence whether any teacher remains in the profession, making it impossible to gauge whether (and the extent to which) the course redesign may have influenced teacher retention. As such, the author remained cautious about concluding that the implementation of the strategies in the course was a key factor influencing graduates to remain in the field. It would be careless to assert that the redesign of any course during the senior year of a teacher preparation program would be a sole influence in the decisions of 13 graduates to remain in the field a year after graduation. With this caveat in mind, the implementation of real-world components such as the in-class mock interview roleplay activity and roundtable/seminar activities discussions may prove to be beneficial in influencing how the new teachers adjust to their own challenges during their first years in the field.

## SUMMARY

The redesign of *EDEX 4334: Teachers as Leaders* during 2022-2023 was a localized attempt within one educator preparation program to begin addressing a wider and far-reaching challenge to P-12 educators. A preliminary review of informal student reflection data suggested that students found the added components of the course to be beneficial. Of the 13 students who accepted teaching positions during the 2023-2024 school year, each of them has reported that they have accepted contracts to teach during the 2024-2025 school year. While it is impossible to conclude that the course redesign influenced these graduates' decisions to remain in the field beyond the first year, it was hoped that the implementation of real-world components benefitted the students beyond graduation and into their first years in the profession.

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