

Principal's Research Review

Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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Recruiting and Retaining Rural Educators: Challenges and Strategies

By Rhonda Barton

One of the key recommendations for school turnaround is “build a committed staff” ([Herman et al., 2008, p. 27](#)). But in rural schools—which make up one-third of the nation’s more than 88,000 schools and educate about a quarter of US students (US Department of Education, n.d.a)—recruiting and retaining effective teachers is often particularly challenging. In a national survey of rural school district administrators in 44 states, more than 84% of responding districts said they experienced some difficulty in filling teaching vacancies; more than half of the respondents reported “moderate” to “extreme difficulty” ([Dadisman, Gravelle, Farmer, & Petrin, 2010](#)).

To be considered “rural” by the US Census Bureau, a community must have fewer than 2,500 residents or meet low-density requirements ([US Census Bureau, 2010](#)).

Schools in those communities tend to be relatively small, with an average enrollment of 353 students, which translates to fewer teachers per building and grade level, along with fewer specialized personnel at the school and district levels. In addition, 1 in 14 rural schools is geographically isolated from cities and towns, which adds to schools’ difficulty in drawing from a large labor pool [(Education Northwest, 2010)].

Although rural locales share many of the same characteristics, lumping all rural schools together does them a great disservice. As Monk (2007) pointed out, the term rural often serves as a catchall for everything that’s not urban or metropolitan. “Such usage overlooks the complexity of rural communities and school districts as well as the considerable variation within them” (p. 156).

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Just the Facts

- To be considered “rural” by the US Census Bureau, a community must have fewer than 2,500 residents or meet low-density requirements ([US Census Bureau, 2010](#)).
- According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([US Department of Education, n.d.a](#)), almost 44% of rural students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, compared to nearly 60% of students in cities.
- The longevity rate for rural teachers staying at one school is an average of nine years. That exceeds the national average of 8.4 years for all public schools and is higher than the rates for both cities and towns ([Coopersmith, 2009](#)).
- Encouraging rural math and science teachers to access online professional development and become part of virtual learning communities can also counteract feelings of isolation (Cady, Aydeniz, & Rearden, 2011).
- The expanded role of special educators in rural areas may mean that some teachers are providing services to students outside their training and expertise and require additional support to feel effective and committed” (Berry et al., 2011, p. 4).

A Context-Driven Issue

Because one size doesn't fit all in describing rural communities, teacher recruitment and retention challenges vary. For example, the smallest rural schools may grapple with having a limited instructional staff, which necessitates recruiting teachers with multiple subject endorsements. Staff members may teach multiple subjects, multiple grades, and sometimes multi-age students within the same classroom. More-remote schools face higher transportation costs that can siphon resources away from other budget items, such as teacher salaries. Housing shortages and limited access to hospitals, banks, stores, cultural facilities, and higher education institutions may also negatively impact teacher recruitment in remote villages. In addition, geographic isolation and small school size can make it more difficult to provide individualized services for special needs students and specialized interventions for students with limited English proficiency.

Although the poverty rate among rural public school students is below the average for students in all locales, it is still substantial. According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([US Department of Education, n.d.a.](#)), almost 44% of rural students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, compared to nearly 60% of students in cities. Rural schools have a slightly higher rate of students with an Individualized Educational Program: 14% compared to the national average of 13%. And, 4% of rural students are English language learners, which is 2 percentage points below the average for all US public schools.

Teachers serving rural students tend to earn less than their counterparts in cities, suburbs, and towns. The average annual salary for rural teachers is \$44,000, compared to \$49,600 for all public school teachers, and the gap between teachers in cities and rural locations is an average of \$7,200 per year ([Coopersmith, 2009](#)).

The percentage of teachers with less than four years of teaching experience is roughly the same for rural schools (18.4%) versus all public schools (19%), but rural schools attract fewer teachers with

advanced academic degrees ([Coopersmith, 2009](#)). The number of teachers in rural public schools who have a master's degree or higher is 10.6 percentage points below the number for suburban schools and 5.7 points below the average for all schools ([Coopersmith, 2009](#)).

On a positive note, however, many rural teachers tend to stay on in their schools. The longevity rate for rural teachers staying at one school is an average of nine years. That exceeds the national average of 8.4 years for all public schools and is higher than the rates for both cities and towns ([Coopersmith, 2009](#)). Contributing to low turnover are factors such as lower average class sizes, more autonomy for teachers, a greater sense of social cohesion, and fewer discipline problems (Monk, 2007). Teachers may also appreciate the enhanced sense of community and the outdoor recreational opportunities that many rural locations offer.

Given both the positive aspects of teaching in rural communities and the difficulties those locales may present, how can communities attract and keep high-quality teachers in rural areas? The research suggests a number of approaches, including better preparing teachers for the reality of teaching in rural and remote locations, offering enhanced professional development and easily accessed online instruction, and nurturing "grow-your-own" (GYO) programs that train paraprofessionals already working in rural schools or target aspiring teachers who want to return to their home communities after receiving their degrees.

Preparing Teachers for Rural Realities

Institutions of higher education are a natural place to look for support in preparing teachers for placements in rural communities, particularly when those postsecondary programs are based in highly rural regions. A study conducted in the mid-continent states (i.e., Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Missouri) found, however, that of the 120 colleges and universities that offered teacher preparation programs in the region, only 17 had a rural program emphasis

([Barley & Brigham, 2008](#)). Nine of the 17 institutions addressed three or more areas that researchers identified as promising components to prepare teachers for rural settings. These included providing options for multiple certifications, offering access to distance learning opportunities and courses in rural areas, recruiting prospective teachers from the pool of residents already living in rural communities, offering practice-teaching placements in rural communities, and incorporating courses related to issues of teaching in rural areas. In their efforts to help foster rural recruitment and retention, the teacher preparation programs relied heavily on using technology for professional development, creating partnerships between universities that credential teachers and rural community colleges, and tailoring programs to prospective teachers' individual certification needs (Barley, 2009; ([Barley & Brigham, 2008](#))).

A study of principals in rural districts that were successful in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers found three approaches that appeared to make a difference:

- Employing targeted incentives in recruiting
- Maximizing federal funding opportunities
- Using a GYO strategy (Beesley, Atwill, Blair & Barley, 2010).

Targeted incentives included salary increases, scholarship programs, affordable housing, and transportation stipends. But, the researchers pointed to other studies that indicated that monetary rewards are often insufficient in motivating teachers to remain on the job. Community factors outside the school's control and altruistic motives also play a strong role.

Principals also reported using federal support such as Title I, Title II, Title VII, and [Rural Education Achievement Program](#) (REAP) funds in their recruitment and retention efforts. Those funds were used as incentive pay, to cover professional development, and to create distance learning opportunities (Beesley et al., 2010).

The GYO approach involved targeting and training local residents who were most likely to return to the area and remain there. Principals

reported providing additional training to paraprofessionals who were already working in their schools; retraining military and National Service (e.g., Peace Corps) volunteers who were service minded; and collaborating with higher education to offer alternative access to coursework (Beesley et al., 2010).

In the national 2007 [Rural Teacher Retention Study](#), 12% of hard-to-staff districts said that they were using a GYO strategy because traditional hiring strategies weren't working; in the same study, 17% of these districts reported paying for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers ([Dadisman et al., 2010](#)). In addition, those schools were turning to alternative certification programs that provided prospective job applicants—frequently from outside the area—with access to teacher preparation programs in varied locations and with flexible expectations regarding the amount of time needed to complete the program. Often aimed at nontraditional students, such programs allow individuals to proceed at their own pace, with remedial and other academic supports to meet the program's academic requirements. Another option for those schools and districts were programs geared toward high school students, combining coursework at the secondary level and at college campuses with opportunities to shadow teachers on the job ([Dadisman et al., 2010](#)).

[Dadisman et al., 2010](#) also investigated GYO and alternative certification programs in 16 states and found that they often involved partnerships among school districts, local community colleges, and four-year institutions. Funded primarily by state and federal grants, successful programs had a strong mentoring component and intentionally sought participants to fill the most pressing school and district instructional needs: math, science, English language learner support, and special education.

Although training local residents to fill vacancies seems to be one promising route, other programs focus on offering “outsiders” a clearer idea of what they might encounter in a rural setting. As early as 1992, studies showed that giving preservice teachers a period of practice teaching in rural and remote schools had a significant impact on changing their

views about seeking or accepting a rural school assignment (Munsch & Boylan, 2008).

Munsch and Boylan (2008) studied the Remote Rural Practicum at Alaska Pacific University, a program that placed Anchorage-based students in Alaska bush villages for a six-day immersion experience. During that time, preservice teachers prepared and taught a unit of instruction in a K–8 classroom in collaboration with a host teacher, facilitated a community event, and experienced living and teaching conditions firsthand. After surveying participants in the program, the researchers found that even a one-week program can “start the change process for preservice teachers unaware of the opportunities and dilemmas facing those who teach in rural, remote locations” (Munsch & Boylan, 2008, p. 21). In addition to broadening their outlook about career possibilities in the bush, the preservice teachers also gained a better understanding of the issues faced by rural, indigenous students who leave their villages to attend school in the urban Alaska settings of Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Recruiting for High-Needs Categories

According to the 2007–8 Schools and Staffing Survey (US Department of Education, n.d.b.), rural schools are particularly challenged when it comes to hiring and retaining math and science teachers who have certification in their main teaching assignment field. The shortage is especially acute at the middle school level, where 39.4% of rural teachers in natural sciences and 42.5% in math or computer science do not hold a certificate allowing them to teach that subject.

One study that focused on teachers’ perceptions of rural science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teaching in Indiana found three factors related to attrition and retention: interpersonal relationships and community ties, school factors, and professional factors (Goodpaster, Adedokun, & Weaver, 2012). Rural STEM teachers reported that strong teacher-parent connections and a high level of mutual trust in their communities were positive motivators in keeping them in their teaching posts. They also cited personal interactions with students

and special professional development programs for rural teachers as contributing to their persistence. In addition, teachers appreciated the abundant opportunities to connect STEM subjects and experiential learning to rural life. Factors that had a negative effect on retention included the difficulty of being viewed as an outsider, low salaries and benefits, poor rural student performance, insufficient mentoring, and lack of access to university resources.

Goodpaster and colleagues (2012) concluded that STEM teachers who came from rural settings had more realistic expectations and a greater chance of retaining their teaching appointments. Even teachers from more urban backgrounds, however, were more likely to stay in their positions if rural school administrators found ways to connect them to key people in the community, provided more preparation time to allow teachers to manage multiple responsibilities, and offered networking opportunities with STEM peers in other rural districts. Encouraging rural math and science teachers to access online professional development and become part of virtual learning communities can also counteract feelings of isolation (Cady, Aydeniz, & Rearden, 2011).

Special education is another area where rural school districts struggle with finding and retaining highly qualified teachers. In the [2009 Rural Special Education Study](#) of 373 special education administrators in 43 states conducted by the National Research Center on Rural Education Support, almost half of respondents (49.3%) said it was somewhat difficult to fill special education teacher vacancies. More than 47% reported they were only able to meet the needs of their students “moderately well” or “not well.” In particular, survey participants found it problematic to provide for students with autism, emotional disturbances, and behavioral disorders ([Dadisman et al., 2010](#)). Strategies for meeting the need were similar to those used in recruiting and retaining rural teachers in general:

- Developing a GYO approach
- Paying for paraprofessionals to become certified
- Providing opportunities for special education

staff to become highly qualified

- Using emergency or provisional certification
- Hiring staff or professionals from local service providers. ([Dadisman et al., 2010](#))

Another national study (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011) that specifically looked at professional development training for rural special education teachers pointed out that the sparse resources and diverse nature of the student population in rural schools created an additional challenge. Rural special educators were frequently called on to provide instruction to K–12 students who had a variety of disabilities across different content areas; often, they were required to serve heterogeneous students in the same classroom. The authors concluded, “The expanded role of special educators in rural areas may mean that some teachers are providing services to students outside their training and expertise and require additional support to feel effective and committed” (Berry et al., 2011, p. 4).

Through surveys and interviews with 203 special educators in 33 states, researchers discovered that the highest demand was for professional development in working with paraprofessionals and parents and for training in specific disabilities. Special educators also sought training to improve their understanding of general education curriculum, how to include students in the general education classroom, and ways to collaborate with general education teachers (Berry et al., 2011). It was important that such training be available to special educators within their own districts because traveling outside their areas presented significant barriers.

Conclusion

According to Eppley (2009), “rural place is much more than simply a backdrop to one’s life” (p. 8). Highly qualified teachers who serve in rural communities understand how the environment defines and shapes its residents. They are able to leverage the small size and autonomy that characterize many rural and remote schools in ways that benefit their students ([Nelson, 2010](#)). They also respect and build

on well-established and ethnically unique cultural norms and traditions in these communities ([Nelson, 2010](#)).

Teacher preparation is key to recruiting and retaining rural educators. If teachers are prepared for the reality of rural life and appreciate its positive aspects, they will be more likely to remain in their positions. Rural administrators can help acculturate—and retain—teachers by providing opportunities for professional development, connecting teachers to their peers in other rural communities, fostering relationship with parents, and supporting ways to integrate staff members into the community. [PRR](#)

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