



Recruiting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers in Rural Areas

Attracting teachers to rural schools and keeping them there has long been a challenge for rural school districts. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) raises the stakes for recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers and presents unique challenges for rural school administrators. This Policy Brief examines the issue from a policy perspective and suggests strategies for addressing the problem.

The close of the 2005-06 school year is the deadline for public schools to ensure that all teachers meet the “highly qualified teacher” criteria established in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.¹ “Rural school districts are going to have just as much difficulty as their urban counterparts placing a highly qualified educator in every classroom by 2006,” predicts Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA).² Especially needed are special education, math, science, and foreign language teachers.³ AASA has identified the ability to attract and keep quality teachers as “the main problem of rural school districts.”⁴ The scope of the problem becomes evident when one considers that 43 percent of U.S. public schools, attended by 31 percent of the nation’s school-age children, are located in rural communities or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people.⁵

The Policy Landscape

In general, the problems faced by rural schools are receiving increased attention nationally. The Congressional Rural Education Caucus, formed in 2003, plans to work with a U.S. Department of Education task force to address the NCLB-related concerns of rural states and school districts. With funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of State Boards of Education has established the Center for Policy Studies in Rural Education to help state policymakers with NCLB-related issues in small and rural schools. The Rural Education Achievement Program, authorized by NCLB, aims to help rural districts compete for federal grants and use them effectively. The National Center for Education Statistics has changed its locale classification system to improve the collection of rural data and has established a Web page dedicated to helping users navigate resources for rural schools.

NCLB Definition of Highly Qualified Teachers

By the end of 2005-06, teachers must

- be fully certified by the state in which they are teaching
- hold at least a bachelor's degree
- demonstrate subject-matter competence in each of the core academic subjects that they teach. Teachers with emergency, temporary, or provisional certificates do not meet the federal definition.

However, no single or national solution to rural education challenges, including teacher recruitment and retention, is likely to emerge from these efforts. Rather, national policies and supports are best seen as a necessary foundation for creating state and local policy solutions. Current state strategies addressing teacher recruitment and retention include scholarship programs, loan and loan-forgiveness programs, salary increases, bonuses, tax credit/mortgage assistance, relocation assistance, and stipends.⁶ How state legislatures address teacher recruitment and retention depends on circumstances that vary from state to state, or even from district to district, such as the availability of economic resources, the cultural priorities of the local community, population density, and terrain.⁷ The varied landscape of rural education underscores policymakers' need to use accurate local-level data when making policy decisions.

In 2003 the Rural School and Community Trust analyzed data from a variety of sources and concluded that many states have a critical need for specific policy attention to rural education. The report draws attention to 13 states, in particular, where this need is deemed most urgent and important. These states, in priority order, are Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, North Dakota, South Dakota, North Carolina, Arkansas, West Virginia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee, Montana, and Maine.⁸

Why Teachers Leave or Stay in Rural Schools

Social, demographic, and economic factors affect teacher supply and demand. Nationally, factors related to working conditions and salary top the list of work-related reasons teachers leave schools. Richard Ingersoll's analysis of national data revealed that teachers in high-poverty, urban public schools cited poor administrative support, lack of faculty influence, and classroom intrusions as the top three factors in deciding to leave. The top three reasons cited by teachers in low-poverty, suburban districts were poor salary, poor administrative support,

and poor student motivation.⁹ Rural superintendents responding to a national survey in 2003 identified low salaries, social isolation, and geographic isolation as the top three factors responsible for their difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers. Other frequently cited factors included lack of adequate housing, the poor economic health of the surrounding community, and being expected to teach multiple subjects or grade levels.¹⁰

As seen in these studies, a factor that affects rural teachers, but one that was not mentioned relative to suburban or urban teachers, is isolation. Isolation's effects on rural recruitment and retention were emphasized by Timothy Collins, former director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, in a 1999 Digest on the topic. He cited a survey conducted among 94 past and current teachers in rural British Columbia, which revealed that teachers left because of geographic isolation, weather, distance from larger communities and family, and inadequate shopping.¹¹ "Recent research on rural teacher recruitment and retention appears thin," Collins wrote, "and much of it has been conducted outside the United States."¹² Five years later, his observation still holds true. The literature suggests, however, that isolation remains a significant factor to rural administrators' difficulties in successfully matching qualified teaching candidates to rural schools and communities.

Rural Recruitment Challenges

Recent data show that schools in isolated rural areas and inner cities are the hardest to staff, particularly those schools serving minority or low-income students.¹³ Shortages are also found in specific geographic regions (the Southeast, Southwest, and the West) and subject areas (foreign languages, special education, math, and science).¹⁴ At the national level, however, "there are few policies aimed at luring prospective teachers from fields and vocations where there is an oversupply into those that are increasingly hard to staff," reports the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Although the federal government offers such incentives in the medical field, "there is no parallel, national policy to help manage the labor force in teaching."¹⁵

The Rural School and Community Trust examined national teacher salary data in 2003 and concluded that salaries in most rural districts are significantly lower than suburban and urban districts, placing rural schools at a disadvantage in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

This is especially true in highly rural areas that have a low tax base and little industry. The Rural School and

Community Trust reports that beginning rural teachers earn 13.3 percent less than teachers in nonrural districts, giving wealthier districts an advantage in attracting recent college graduates.¹⁶ Currently, 43 states offer rural teacher salaries that average less than those of suburban and urban teachers, with rural teacher salaries going as low as 79 cents on the dollar in Nebraska.¹⁷ Analysts observe that NCLB requirements will likely intensify existing problems as competition for highly qualified teachers increases.¹⁸

“The disparities in teacher salaries are due in large part to state funding formulas,” according to Cynthia Reeves. “Many state funding formulas for teacher salaries are based on housing costs. In areas of declining population, housing is less expensive, and so it is assumed that teachers require less to live in those areas.”¹⁹ This equation does not, however, consider some of the “hidden costs” of rural living. In remote areas where public transportation is not available, a reliable vehicle, sometimes with four-wheel drive, is a must. Gasoline expenses are greater because of the distances rural teachers must drive, not only to work but in their personal lives (e.g., to shop or to seek medical care). Acceptable housing may be hard to find. Studies show that for these and other reasons, it will take *more* money to attract qualified teachers to poorer areas, which are often seen as having a lower cost of living.²⁰

Smaller salary offerings, however, are only part of the problem rural recruiters must overcome. “Small, poorer rural communities also lack social amenities that would attract and retain recent college graduates, who are statistically young and single.”²¹ Limited shopping, entertainment, and opportunities for social interaction may discourage young applicants. Unless they are committed to a rural area by family ties or by choice, top teaching candidates may be tempted by suburban or urban areas that offer amenities not available in most rural areas: an expanded social life, a nearby university, more housing options, more services within the community, and greater opportunity for spousal employment.²²

To overcome these barriers, Collins suggests targeting candidates “with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas” and selling candidates on the benefits of rural life, such as a lower crime rate, slower pace of life, and nearby access to nature and outdoor recreation.²³ Many see rural areas as ideal for raising a family. Advantages of teaching in rural schools include relatively small classes, few discipline problems, greater student and parent participation, and greater opportunities for leadership.²⁴

Various “grow-your-own” strategies are being tried. Such programs encourage and support people within the commu-

nity who have the interest and ability to become teachers. An example is the Appalachian Model Teaching Consortium, developed to address the teacher shortage in rural, economically depressed Grayson County, Virginia. The school district teamed with Wytheville Community College and Radford University to create a structured curriculum path for high school students interested in teaching. Articulation agreements among the schools allow students to begin earning college credit in high school, continue for two years at the local community college, complete an undergraduate degree at the university, and return to student teach in the county school system.²⁵

Rural Retention Challenges

A number of researchers and national educational organizations are urging states to focus on “developing programs that target persons who are willing to work in hard-to-staff schools and positions,” reports Reeves.²⁶ The success of these and other recruitment strategies, however, will be limited if the high turnover rate is ignored.²⁷ Excessive teacher turnover in low-income urban and rural communities saddles schools with huge financial costs, impedes school improvement efforts, and undermines teaching quality and student achievement, concluded the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future.²⁸ The Texas Center for Educational Research estimated that, in 1999, it cost Texas school systems an average of \$11,120 each time a teacher left (\$8,230 for a teacher with no experience; \$13,122 for a teacher with 20 years of experience).²⁹

The commission urges policymakers to resist solutions that lower standards for entry into the profession (partly because this strategy has been shown to double the attrition rate for beginning teachers) and to focus on strategies to keep high-quality teachers in the nation’s classrooms.³⁰ Essential components of such strategies include better teacher preparation, improved school support and organization, and salaries comparable to those offered elsewhere.

Teacher education programs too often overlook the need to prepare prospective teachers for the demands and conditions of teaching in a rural environment, assert several rural researchers.³¹ The ideal rural teacher is someone who is comfortable with the rural way of life and capable of wearing many hats; that is, certified to teach multiple subjects or grade levels, prepared to supervise several extracurricular activities, and able to teach students of differing ability levels within a single classroom.³² Prospective teachers are often unprepared for these

demands.³³ “New teachers become easily discouraged if they haven’t been prepared for rural living and teaching,” notes rural researcher Hobart Harmon.³⁴

Retaining highly qualified teachers will require many schools, whether rural or urban, to improve supports for new teachers and to better organize for success. New teachers, in particular, cite “lack of support” as their top concern, according to the National Education Association.³⁵ “Many schools are not organized to hire and support new teachers in ways that help them enter the profession smoothly and attain early success,” according to new research from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Among new teachers, slightly more than half say they get no extra assistance.³⁶ A recent analysis of the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey shows that 14 percent of new teachers leave the field after their first year, and another 15 percent change schools.³⁷ New teachers who received more induction support were much less likely to quit in the first year, but only 22 states require and finance induction programs for all new teachers.³⁸ Fewer than 1 percent of new teachers had the most comprehensive support package (a mentor in the same field, seminars, common planning time with peers, teacher networks, and administrative support.) Only 11 percent had a reduced teaching schedule—a support commonly provided in other nations, but one that is especially difficult to offer in small rural schools, which often lack the resources to afford new teachers this benefit.³⁹

Retaining experienced teachers may require rural schools to offer financial incentives as well. The average salary in rural districts is 3.4 percent lower than in nonrural areas, and rural teachers with master’s degrees and 20 years of experience earn 17.2 percent less than their nonrural peers.⁴⁰ While 34 states and the District of Columbia offer retention bonuses to veteran accomplished teachers, only five of them gear those bonuses toward teachers in hard-to-staff schools.

NCLB’s new certification requirements, combined with these factors, will likely increase disincentives to teach in rural schools, particularly rural secondary schools.⁴¹ Because of their smaller enrollments, rural schools rely on teachers who can teach more than one subject or grade level. Rural teachers are being asked to maintain appropriate credentials while living far from the nearest university and to prepare for and teach several different classes each day, all at a salary that may be thousands of dollars less than their suburban or urban counterparts. Unless teachers are rooted to a rural school by a spouse’s employment or some other factor external to the school, teachers may opt to take a position in a larger district.

What Policy Leaders Can Do

Data from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey show that teacher supply-and-demand problems are regional and subject-specific. Districts in the Southeast, Southwest, and West had more trouble filling vacancies than those in the Northeast and Midwest. Hardest to fill were teaching vacancies in foreign languages, special education, vocational education, math, and science. “From a public policy perspective, the fact that the impact of the teacher shortage problem was so unevenly distributed across schools and school districts suggests a need for targeted efforts to address the problem(s).”⁴² The following suggestions emerged from a survey of recent research reports, data analyses, and surveys as well as reports from national education organizations.

Improve incentives for teaching in hard-to-staff rural schools. To be effective, financial incentives must strategically target teachers willing to teach where the need is greatest: high-poverty schools, remote areas, or hard-to-fill subject areas. “Rural districts around the country report that many highly qualified new teachers are taking jobs in higher paying districts (or states),” according to the Rural School and Community Trust. Its recommendations include (1) seeing that rural teacher salaries and benefits are comparable to those offered in suburban and urban areas, (2) providing additional financial incentives in hard-to-staff rural districts, and (3) having the federal government play a substantial financial role in supporting the recruitment of highly qualified teachers to rural schools.⁴³ State policies can mediate funding disparities so that rural school districts can compete with larger districts for highly qualified teachers.

Promote improved recruitment and hiring practices. Targeted marketing techniques that emphasize the advantages of living and teaching in rural communities are an underused strategy for recruitment. Such outreach needs to be supplemented by modernized recruitment that reduces the paperwork burden for applicants (e.g., only three states have a common application form that can be used in any district in the state).⁴⁴ And the hiring process should include interactions with teachers as well as the school principal, with more opportunities for a two-way exchange of information.⁴⁵ This information exchange is especially important in more isolated rural areas and in areas with distinct cultural environments.

Require and finance comprehensive induction programs. Fewer than half of all states require and finance induction programs for all new teachers, even though studies show that such programs greatly decrease the likelihood of new teachers quitting in the first year.⁴⁶ The

U.S. Department of Education recommends that induction programs include mentoring and professional development opportunities.⁴⁷ In rural schools, induction programs can also play an important role in helping new teachers establish connections within the broader community served by the school.

Nurture local talent. The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality identifies “developing local talent” as a key component of the hard-to-staff school solution. It is important for policymakers to offer programs that improve access to teacher education programs for individuals in a variety of situations: high school students, out-of-field teachers, school paraprofessionals, and second-career adults.⁴⁸ Such efforts will need to take into account, and counter, the comparatively low postsecondary aspirations and enrollment among rural students, compared to their urban and suburban peers.⁴⁹ The Economic Research Service reports that only 17 percent of rural adults age 25 and older had completed college in 2000, half the percentage of urban adults. Moreover, the rural-urban gap in college completion has widened since 1990.⁵⁰ In these circumstances, nurturing local talent can require greater collaboration among school districts and postsecondary institutions, increased use of distance learning in remote districts, establishment of clearly defined career paths for local residents, and targeted outreach efforts. In economically distressed areas, tuition assistance and other financial incentives may be especially important.

Foster greater collaboration among public school systems and postsecondary institutions. Boswell asserts that there is a “significant disconnect” between public school systems and higher education.⁵¹ As certification requirements tighten under NCLB, such gaps will need to be bridged for teachers in rural areas to gain access to classes that fulfill these requirements. Teachers in the most remote areas may need to rely on distance-learning courses. In rural areas, community colleges may play a key role. As recently pointed out by WestEd, community colleges “often provide the only access to higher education in students’ home communities.”⁵² The Appalachian Model Teaching Consortium, a grow-your-own strategy mentioned earlier, requires the collaboration of a community college, the school district, and the nearest university. Federal and state policymakers could provide assistance and incentives for creating such alliances.

Create avenues for greater community involvement. Some states are encouraging communities to assume greater responsibility for attracting teachers. The Educa-

tion Commission of the States reports, “One isolated district in North Dakota managed to lure a teacher by promising him bird-hunting rights on private farmland.”⁵³ “The degree to which a rural teacher becomes involved in community educational and cultural programs influences his or her decision to remain; therefore, retention requires a coordinated school-community effort,” says Collins. He suggests initiating a school-community orientation for new teachers and creating other ways to welcome and include them in community life.⁵⁴

What Do Rural Superintendents Say?

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), in partnership with AEL, conducted a nationwide online survey of more than 3,000 rural school superintendents in 2003 to discover how rural school superintendents are addressing teacher recruitment and retention problems. The following conclusions are based on an analysis of the 896 valid completed surveys that were collected:

- Multiple-subject teaching was reported as common, presenting a challenge for teachers to obtain multiple certifications, particularly for middle school teachers, many of whom hold only a K-8 certificate.
- The number of highly qualified teachers decreased and the number of teachers with multiple-subject assignments increased as district size got smaller, with the smallest districts relying most heavily on multiple-subject teachers.
- Superintendents from the smallest districts—those with 250 or fewer students—also indicated the greatest difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers.
- The largest obstacles to attracting and retaining teachers were reported to be low salaries and the isolation of rural districts.
- Of the many different types of incentives used to attract and retain teachers, the most commonly reported were training/professional development and financial incentives including tuition assistance and bonuses.
- Despite their concerns, superintendents estimated that high numbers of teachers employed in their districts would be able to meet the federal definition of “highly qualified,” although there was some confusion about the definition at the federal vs. state levels.

Source: *How Are Rural School Districts Meeting the Teacher Quality Requirements of No Child Left Behind?* This report, by T. Schwartzbeck, D. Redfield, and P. Hammer (2003), presents the results of a 2003 survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators.

Support high-quality research on rural education issues. Rural-specific research is needed to pinpoint problems and solutions in teacher recruitment and retention.⁵⁵ For example, when the Education Commission of the States surveyed the literature for possible benefits of deliberate efforts to prepare teachers for success in rural schools, it was unable to find sufficient research on the topic.⁵⁶ Oklahoma has reported that research is needed to understand why so many more students within the state train to be teachers than are hired.⁵⁷

Summary

Rural teacher recruitment and retention problems vary from place to place, but some challenges are common among almost all rural schools: isolation, lower teacher pay, and the need for teachers who are certified to teach multiple subjects or grade levels. To recruit highly qualified teachers, rural districts will need to emphasize the benefits of rural life, adopt proactive recruitment strategies that target those wanting to live in rural areas, develop local talent, improve the hiring process, and offer incentives for working in the hardest-to-staff schools or subject areas. To retain highly qualified teachers, rural districts will need to develop comprehensive induction programs that include mentoring, work with institutions of higher education to provide teachers with easy access to certification options, and involve the community in welcoming and supporting new teachers.

Greater competition among districts for highly qualified teachers, spurred by NCLB, makes state and federal support for rural schools more important than ever. States can mediate funding disparities among school systems, require and finance comprehensive teacher induction programs, facilitate regional and statewide collaborations among school systems and institutions of higher education, and offer incentives for teaching in the most rural schools. The federal government can support state and district efforts by assisting with such incentives and by supporting further research on rural recruitment and retention.

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