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Teacher Retention in a Rural East Texas School District

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Teacher Retention in a Rural East Texas School District

Many rural school districts across Texas confront a range of educational challenges that are unique to their size and region, from technology allotment and computer training to parent involvement and community engagement. However, one widespread struggle shared by all is retaining high-quality teachers. Given the competition created by the large number of rural school districts in Texas and demands placed on them to ensure that every student receives the instruction and support needed to succeed, it is crucial that rural school leaders have a firm understanding as to why certain teachers remain committed to teaching in remote locales. The focus of this study looks at teacher retention in one rural east Texas school district and the reasons why teachers remain committed. The study concludes with a review of strategies leadership in rural school districts can utilize to maintain a supportive environment in an effort to reduce teacher attrition.

According to a U.S. Department of Education report in 2013-2014, Texas had 631 public school districts out of 1,027 (61%) classified as being in rural locations (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a). Nationwide, 7,156 public school districts out of 13,491 (53%) were classified rural in 2013-2014; compared to 6% classified as city, 23% classified as suburban, and 18% classified as town (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a). Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein (2012) estimated that across the country the number of students enrolled in rural school districts at 20%. Moreover, among the 250 poorest counties in the United States, 224 of them are identified as rural (Monk, 2007).

Despite the considerable number of rural school districts, many located in the poorest regions of the country, educational research and policy studies continue to largely ignore the unique relationships between rural schooling, community well being, and academic achievement (Biddle & Hall, 2017; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006). Matters of importance include availability of instructional resources and quality of teaching, school climate and safety, and teacher support professionally and financially. In recent years, legislative reform efforts directed at improving the quality of public education has put a strain on rural districts that typically have low fiscal capacity in meeting these mandates.

Stronge (2006) expressed concern that the uneven distribution of resources between rural and urban schools has a profound effect on schools. He argued that state governments frequently do not give rural schools the attention they should regarding basic instructional materials. As a result, principals in rural schools often find it difficult to carry out instructional functions effectively. Monk (2007) noted that rural schools have a below-average share of highly trained teachers, which in turn affects the quality of instruction and student achievement.

Additionally, compensation in rural schools tends to be low, in part because of a lower fiscal capacity in rural areas. This cycle of low fiscal capacity, poor academic performance, and below average pay complicates efforts to attract, train, and retain teachers. School safety is another important responsibility principals and staff must continuously address. Rural schools are often challenged with providing adequate building security throughout the day because of their smaller staffs. Although shared responsibility can help in maintaining campus security, more than leadership style is needed for creating a safe and orderly school environment in rural districts, particularly those that are socially isolated with limited funding (Bellibas & Liu, 2016).

Over the years, this limited understanding has adversely affected rural districts in terms of funding, professional development, and student achievement. While research has documented the challenges associated with teacher professional development in rural areas, and underscored the need to consider the rural context (Howley & Howley, 2004; Oliver, 2007), studies are not well represented in the rural education literature. When differences have been shown, they are typically in comparison to their urban counterparts. For example, urban teachers have participated in significantly more hours of professional development than rural teachers and more likely to focus on content-specific activities (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). For teachers working in rural areas, these inequities have resulted in a feeling of professional disconnect, making it difficult for rural districts to retain highly qualified teachers (Burton, Brown, & Johnson, 2013). To appreciate the challenges facing rural leaders and their teachers, it is important to understand the factors that drive the policy-making processes at the local, state, and national levels.

Rural School Policymaking

Although state and federal agencies shoulder the responsibility for the formulation and implementation of educational policies and programs for all schools, it is clear that suburban and urban interests often overshadow those of rural schools. When researchers and scholars analyze America's educational systems, they usually focus on urban centers (Martin, 2016), ignoring the impact that legislative reforms have on rural school districts. However, rural school systems make up more than half of the nation's operating school districts, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a). To expand on this disparity, the 2018 legislative report "New York's Rural Schools Forgotten Crisis" (Rural Association of New York State, 2018) stated:

When state leaders look to address the worst conditions in New York State's schools, they rarely think of rural schools. With fewer residents and lacking the political clout to demand attention, our rural schools are withering from benign neglect. Even a cursory inspection reveals a broad and deep crisis.

It seems evident in the current climate of education reform that this lack of continuity creates educational inequalities, placing the academic opportunities and experiences of children attending rural schools at a disadvantage (Burton et al., 2013; Belsie, 2003). This portrayal of governmental policymaking and its affect on student academic achievement in rural America is a growing concern. For rural students to take full advantage of the American educational system, research and policy analyses must focus on the needs of rural schools.

Teaching and learning occur within the social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic contexts of a particular location. These contextual factors not only influence the learning opportunities available to students, but also the expectations of the teachers hired to instruct. For those who live and work in rural communities, rurality is more than a physical placement; it is also an expression of thought (Corbett, 2013). In contrast to this rurality framework is metrocentricity, with a focus towards a city-based way of life (Campbell & Yates, 2011). Not surprisingly, individuals who are less metrocentric are more likely to remain teachers in rural schools, ignoring any downsides of rural living and focusing on the positives. Although not all rural communities have the same contextual characteristics, those who live in the country generally share views and attitudes different from people who live in cities (Barton, 2012). Recognizing these nuances is vital if rural school leaders are to successfully retain teachers.

In recent years, teacher shortages have increased throughout the United States, a trend that has disproportionately impacted rural districts. According to the National Conference of State Legislators report, 39% of rural schools struggle to fill teaching positions (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). Contributing to this problem, a study by the Center for American Progress found that the enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined by 35% between 2010 and 2018 (Partelow, 2019). Moreover, Will (2018) reported that nationally there is a scarcity of certified teachers in hard to fill areas including bilingual education, special education, high school math and science, and foreign languages. In Texas, equally alarming is the lack of certified teachers for bilingual education, English as a second language, special education, computer science, and mathematics (Dooley, 2018). According to Latterman and Steffes (2017), this disparity between the number of positions available and qualified teachers willing to fill them is attributed to inadequate recruitment and retention practices, a growing

numbers of baby boomers retiring, and fewer college students majoring in education.

Another ongoing concern for rural schools is that teacher pay is less in remote locales. “Why Rural Matters 2018-2019” reported that the average annual teacher salary in rural districts was \$69,797, compared to \$74,153 in suburban districts and \$73,357 in urban districts (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019). In Texas, teacher salaries primarily depend on location; larger districts, often situated in wealthier areas, tend to outperform the rest of the state. According to the Texas Education Agency Snapshot 2018 Summary Table, districts with less than 500 students paid an average salary of \$44,779 compared to districts with 50,000 students or more paying an average salary of \$56,471 (Texas Education Agency, n.d.a).

Data from the Schools and Staffing Survey showed that for the 2012-13 school year, the attrition rate for rural teachers was 8.4% compared to 7.9% for urban teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b). These higher turnover rates and unfilled positions are costly to rural districts, and not just in terms of finding replacements, fewer teachers in the administrative pipeline mean fewer teachers to pursue leadership positions within the district (Latterman & Steffes, 2017).

Local government agencies are addressing teacher shortages and retention through a variety of strategies. Successful measures include increasing local community recruitment efforts, improving training through mentoring programs, and boosting salary and compensation packages (Burton et al., 2013). At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education annually awards Teacher Quality Partnership grants to teacher preparation programs, many for rural teaching residencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, The Rural Educator Support and Training Act, seeks to address the challenges rural communities face by providing professional development and loan forgiveness for teachers currently teaching in rural communities, as well as creating a scholarship program for teachers committed to serving these areas (U.S. Congress, 2018).

In Texas, Commissioner of Education Commissioner Mike Morath established the Rural Schools Task Force in 2016 to help address statewide concerns (Texas Education Agency, n.d.b). One of its goals has been to recognize innovative ideas aimed at teacher retention. By bringing together rural school district superintendents from across the state, the task force has identified a variety of successful best practices leading towards lowering teacher turnover rates through reshaping school culture.

Theoretical Frameworks

In hopes of providing a perspective on teacher retention matters in rural east Texas schools, the theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the “three C’s” societal model proposed by Sher (1983): characteristics, conditions, and compensation. Teachers are attracted to certain kinds of schools and communities for particular reasons; therefore, understanding what incentives draw quality teachers to remote and often socially and culturally isolated locations is essential for rural school recruitment and retention.

Characteristics

Sher (1983) identified three characteristics affecting teacher attrition in rural locations: background experiences, individual expectations, and exposure to induction programs. For example, if a teacher was brought up and trained in an urban environment, they would be less likely to seek out a rural position, much less remain employed if hired. For that reason, the profile of the ideal rural educator is likely to be someone with a rural background. McCaw, Freeman, and Philhower (2002) suggested that teachers having personal expectations aligned to a rural lifestyle are less likely to leave. Hardre (2009) further supported this theory reporting that teachers raised in rural areas are more likely to appreciate local values and work within the community to leverage those ideals for teaching. Ingersol and Kralik (2004) recommended that creating induction programs for first year teachers also reduce teacher attrition rates. Johnson, Berg and Donaldson (2005) citing The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers advanced this theory by suggesting that there was a positive relationship between induction programs and teacher competency leading towards a reduction in teacher turnover.

Conditions

Sher (1983) proposed that school working conditions and environmental surroundings, such as cultural venues, recreational opportunities, housing prospects, and family and friends nearby all influence teacher retention. Mitchell (2018) observed that rural teachers often face limited housing options, fewer recreational venues, and worries of isolation in unfamiliar areas. There are benefits however, McShane and Smarick (2019) found that rural communities are frequently a mainstay of tradition and values; moreover, they exhibit higher levels of social structure and stronger beliefs in community safety. Further reinforcing this theory that retention is a matter of fit, a report by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2002) concluded that teacher shortages were primarily attributed to difficulties in finding applicants attuned to a rural lifestyle.

Compensation

Sher (1983) broadly defined teacher financial compensation as any salary, reward, benefit, or stipend. As varied as payments can be, rural districts often

struggle with creating incentive packages that will offset teacher attrition. Gagnon and Mattingly (2012) supported this theory suggesting that earnings do affect a teacher's decisions to leave and rural districts are more inclined to provide lower salary schedules. Brenner (2016) argued that alternative funding sources like competitive grants, which could supplement state and local dollars for salaries and training, are impractical for many rural districts because the grant application process requires a substantial amount of work from specially trained staff. Moreover, Showalter, Klein, Johnson, and Hartman (2017) reported that on average rural districts receive just 17% of state education funding. Consequently, for rural districts, typically found in poorer regions, all these factors translate into teacher shortages.

Bandura's (2006) theoretical framework of self-efficacy further helps in understanding teacher attrition in rural schools. Self-efficacy, grounded in the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory, underscores the view that people can exercise a degree of control over what they do (Bandura, 2006). This premise is based on an individual's belief or conviction that he or she can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or poorly motivated (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). Accordingly, teachers who exhibit this trait are self-reflecting, self-regulating, and self-organizing. As they reflect on their personal efficacy, they begin the process by setting goals, then predicting possible outcomes, and finally monitoring and regulating their actions. Ultimately, efficacy influences the personal decision to remain working in the classroom or not, even under the most trying conditions.

Self-efficacy beliefs also help establish how environmental impediments and opportunities are perceived while affecting the choice of activities, how much effort is exerted, and how long people will persist when confronted with problems (Bandura, 2006). In addition, it can be a predictor of how resilient they will be when dealing with failures, and how much stress or even depression they experience when managing taxing tasks (Bandura, 1997). Teachers with a stronger sense of efficacy work harder with students and persevere longer, even when students are challenging to teach or environmental conditions are less than desirable (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk, & Hoy, 1998).

Rural Classification

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) began classifying all districts in the United States into one of twelve categories based on school address and corresponding coordinates of latitude and longitude. Different from the earlier metro-centric classification system, this new urban-centric classification system has four major locale categories—city, suburban, town, and rural—each further subdivided into three subcategories. The rural category

includes the following subcategories: fringe, distant, and remote (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.c).

This urban-centric system analyzes towns and rural areas to their relative proximity to larger urban centers; unlike the previous metro-centric classification system that differentiates towns based on population size. This significant feature not only allows for the identification but also differentiation of districts in relatively remote areas compared to those that may be located just outside an urban center (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.c). Combining all three subcategories using the NCES classification, in the 2017-18 school year, Texas had 648 rural districts out of 1,211 total districts, accounting for 53.5% (Texas Education Agency, n.d.c).

By comparison, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) classifies Texas public school districts based on community types using factors such as enrollment, growth in enrollment, economic status, and proximity to urban areas (Texas Education Agency, n.d.c). These criteria group districts into eight categories ranging from major urban to rural without subcategories. Charter school districts make up a ninth category. The categories are:

- Major Urban
- Major Suburban
- Other Central City
- Other Central City Suburban
- Independent Town
- Non-Metropolitan: Fast Growing
- Non-Metropolitan: Stable
- Rural
- Charter School Districts

A district falls into rural if it does not meet the characteristics for classification in any of the other categories. A rural district has either (a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; (b) an enrollment of less than 300 students (Texas Education Agency, n.d.d). Using TEA's definition, there are 463 districts in Texas identified as rural out of 1,211 total districts, accounting for 38.2% (Texas Education Agency, n.d.c). This number is far less than the 648 districts identified using NCES's urban-centric classification system. Regardless of one's definition of rural, the data is unmistakable—a significant number of students in Texas are educated in rural school districts. Yet, policymakers and educational experts spend considerably more time and greater resources evaluating effective teaching strategies and measuring student learning outcomes in urban and suburban districts, leaving rural schools at a disadvantage.

Research Design

In an effort to improve teacher retention, the first-year superintendent of a small rural school district in east Texas wanted to know why some teachers stayed while others left. The superintendent also wanted to understand what factors were affecting teacher retention so that the district leadership could apply this knowledge toward increasing their desire to stay. To better comprehend teacher retention in this rural district, 98 teachers representing the four campuses (primary school, elementary school, junior high school, and high school), volunteered for the study.

Table 1 provides a detailed look at the district's 2018 profile and its comparison to the state (Texas Education Agency, n.d.e; Texas Education Agency, n.d.f).

Table 1
School District Profile

| Teacher Profile | District | State |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Total number (FTE) | 181.5 | 356,838.1 |
| 5 years or less experience | 32.4% | 37.3% |
| Average years of experience | 13.6 | 10.9 |
| Advanced degrees | 21.0% | 24.5 |
| Turnover rate | 21.3% | 16.6% |
| Average salary | \$46,124 | \$53,334 |
| Student Profile | District | State |
| Total number | 2,483 | 5,385,012 |
| African American | 40.0% | 12.6% |
| White | 37.1% | 27.8% |
| Hispanic | 18.9% | 52.4% |

| | | |
|------------------|------|------|
| Asian | 0.4% | 4.4% |
| American Indian | 0.2% | 0.4% |
| Pacific Islander | 0.2% | 0.1% |

A pilot study was conducted using randomly selected teachers before administering the Phase 1 self-completion online survey and Phase 2 face-to-face semi-structured interview to ensure that the research instrument functioned well. Instructions about how to record responses were analyzed for clarity. Questions that appeared to be poorly worded or confusing to pilot respondents were rewritten. Finally, questions that were deemed not strictly relevant to the research study were deleted from the instrument.

For Phase 1 of the study, all teachers in the district were encouraged by the superintendent to voluntarily complete a four-question likert-type self-completion online survey, concluding with a question asking for suggestions for improving the school organization. Of the 170 teachers in the district, 98 completed the online survey (58% response rate). This initial data collection consisted of the following five questions:

1. How committed is the leadership on insisting quality instruction in the classroom?
2. How committed is the leadership on ensuring an orderly and safe climate conducive to teaching and learning?
3. How easy is it to obtain the resources that you need for teaching?
4. How fairly compensated are you for your work?
5. Do you have suggestions about how the district leadership can improve as an organization?

For Phase 2 of the study, using a random sampling technique, 10 teachers were identified from the initial 98 to participate in an in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interview. All 10 of those selected agreed to be interviewed for this study. The Phase 2 data collection portion of this study utilized semi-structured interviews for further insights into their work satisfaction and ways to improve the school organization through the following five open-ended questions:

1. What keeps you working in the district?
2. What do you look forward to when you come to work each day?
3. Is the district's leadership providing you with opportunities to grow and develop as a person, team member, and professional? Provide examples.
4. How can the district leadership make improvements in helping you reach your goals?

5. How can the district leadership make improvements in helping you reach your goals?

This in-depth interview process allowed teachers a great deal of latitude in responding while providing enough structure to ensure comparability among respondents.

For each question asked in the Phase 2 interview process, a two-cycle progressive refinement coding technique was used to create themes representing the most salient points among the 10 participants (Saldaña, 2009). In Vivo Coding was used for the first-cycle coding highlighting teacher beliefs and perspectives. This methodology relied on the direct words of the teachers in creating the codes, as opposed to researcher-generated terms. Focus Coding was used for the second-cycle coding concentrating on the most significant points identified in the first-cycle coding to produce more general themes that represented the opinions of all participants interviewed.

Findings

Phase 1

How committed is the leadership on insisting quality instruction in the classroom?

When asked their opinion on how committed the district's leadership was on insisting quality instruction takes place in the classroom, the majority believed that the leadership was extremely committed to very committed (74.49%). Only 25.51% said that the leadership was only moderately committed to slightly committed to insisting on quality instruction. None of the teachers believed that the leadership was not at all committed. Table 2 provides a detailed look at the survey question results.

Table 2

How committed is the leadership on insisting quality instruction in the classroom?

| Response | Percentage Who Agreed | Number Who Agreed |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Extremely committed | 19.39 | 19 |
| Very committed | 55.10 | 54 |
| Moderately committed | 18.37 | 18 |
| Slightly committed | 7.14 | 7 |

| | | |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Not at all committed | 0 | 0 |
|----------------------|---|---|

How committed is the leadership on ensuring an orderly and safe climate conducive to teaching and learning?

When asked their opinion on how committed the district's leadership was on ensuring an orderly and safe climate conducive to teaching and learning, again the majority (68.37%) believed that the leadership was extremely committed to very committed. Only 28.57% said that the leadership was only moderately committed to slightly committed to ensuring a safe and orderly school climate. While 3.06% of the teachers believed that the leadership was not at all committed. Table 3 provides a detailed look at the survey question results.

Table 3

How committed is the leadership on ensuring an orderly and safe climate conducive to teaching and learning?

| Response | Percentage Who Agreed | Number Who Agreed |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Extremely committed | 23.47 | 23 |
| Very committed | 44.90 | 44 |
| Moderately committed | 20.41 | 20 |
| Slightly committed | 8.16 | 8 |
| Not at all committed | 3.06 | 3 |

How committed is the leadership on ensuring measures of student achievement form the basis for program evaluation?

When asked their opinion on how committed the district's leadership was on ensuring student achievement formed the basis for program evaluation, again the majority (69.39%) believed that the leadership was extremely committed to very committed. Only 29.59% said that the leadership was only moderately committed to slightly committed to using measures of student achievement for evaluation. While 1.02% of the teachers believed that the leadership was not at all committed. Table 4 provides a detailed look at the survey question results.

Table 4

How committed is the leadership on ensuring measures of student achievement form the basis for program evaluation?

| Response | Percentage Who Agreed | Number Who Agreed |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Extremely committed | 21.43 | 21 |
| Very committed | 47.96 | 47 |
| Moderately committed | 26.53 | 26 |
| Slightly committed | 3.06 | 3 |
| Not at all committed | 1.02 | 1 |

How easy is it to obtain the resources that you need for teaching?

When asked their opinion on how easy it was to obtain resources for teaching, the majority (53.05%) believed that it was extremely easy to slightly easy. Only 30.61 percent said that it was slightly difficult to moderately difficult to obtain teaching resources. While 6.12% of the teachers believed that it was extremely difficult to obtain teaching resources. Table 5 provides a detailed look at the survey question results.

Table 5

How easy is it to obtain the resources that you need for teaching?

| Response | Percentage Who Agreed | Number Who Agreed |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Extremely easy | 7.14 | 7 |
| Moderately easy | 34.69 | 34 |
| Slightly easy | 11.22 | 11 |
| Neither easy or difficult | 10.20 | 10 |
| Slightly difficult | 19.39 | 19 |
| Moderately difficult | 11.22 | 11 |

| | | |
|---------------------|------|---|
| Extremely difficult | 6.12 | 6 |
|---------------------|------|---|

How fairly compensated are you for your work?

When asked their opinion on how well compensated they were for their work, only 23.47% believed they were extremely fairly to very fairly compensated. The majority (66.33%) said that they were moderately fairly to slightly fairly compensated for their work. While 10.20% believed that they were not fairly at all compensated. Table 6 provides a detailed look at the survey question results.

Table 6

How fairly compensated are you for your work?

| Response | Percentage Who Agreed | Number Who Agreed |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Extremely fairly | 6.12 | 6 |
| Very fairly | 17.35 | 17 |
| Moderately fairly | 39.80 | 39 |
| Slightly fairly | 26.53 | 26 |
| Not at all fairly | 10.20 | 10 |

Phase 2

What keeps you working in the district?

When asked what keeps them in the district the overwhelming responses among teachers centered on having a strong community identity, belief that they can make a difference in students' lives, and meaningful relationships with co-workers. Kim, teacher at the primary school, remarked, "I believe that I can make a difference in not just the students' lives but in the lives of everyone that I encounter. I see that there is a need here." Joanna, from the high school, shared, "It was somewhat difficult to get involved with the culture but I now understand the culture and I have now connected with that." Reasons among participants focused on service and relationships in the community, including

- having a sense of community;
- believing they can make a difference;
- growing up here;
- having relationships with co-workers.

What do you look forward to when you come to work each day?

Teachers had the following comments about why they get enjoyment from coming to school each day. Julia, a teacher from the junior high school, responded, “I want to see success for my children, and for me that is growth. I have students who come from homes that have sexual abuse, that have neglect, that have grandmother raising nine grandchildren that are from different units. They may not have had breakfast. They may not have had a good night’s sleep. Their physical needs are rarely met and you do your best to be a safe place, to be an encourager, to try to show, ‘I believe in you. Look what you’ve done. Look what you didn’t know last week but you can do this week.’” Staci, an elementary teacher, replied, “I like being able to refine and see where I can make improvements. That whole feeling where you can see when something clicks in teaching math especially. It won’t click and then suddenly you say something slightly different.” Responses focused on student success and a feeling of satisfaction, such as

- making a difference;
- helping struggling learners;
- seeing the success of their students.

Is the district’s leadership providing you with opportunities to grow and develop as a person, team member, and professional?

For novice and experienced teachers, providing professional learning opportunities is a significant reason for staying in a district. Teachers explained that not only offering training but also communicating workshops specific to their areas of expertise and needs showed that the district valued growth and development among its staff. Thomas, a high school teacher, lamented, “I don’t get a lot of district and professional development stuff. That’s a difference. I came from one of the largest districts in the state. You could get professional development anytime you wanted for anything that you wanted, the resources were just there.” LaSharia, an elementary teacher, explained, “Professionally, this has been the hardest year for me. I am in year five. I’ve worked in other districts that seem to have it more together; the training was very systematic. It was very much focused what we needed individually.” Their list of suggestions to further enhance development opportunities comprised

- offering more professional development opportunities and workshops tailored to individual needs;
- integrating digital technology for tracking completed activities;
- supporting innovative ideas that embrace 21st century learning skills.

How can the district leadership make improvements in helping you reach your goals?

Improving opportunities for reaching personal goals had different meanings, some teachers focused on professional development and helping

colleagues grow, while others believed communication and accountability were key. “I think communication, consistency, and accountability are really important,” said Chad, a junior high school teacher. Christine, primary school teacher, offered, “Provide me the opportunity to use what I have, my experience, to share with others.” Teachers identified two areas that would help them reach their goals, thereby increasing the likelihood of staying in the district

- providing more consistency in rules and procedures at the campus level;
- encouraging master teachers in the district to lead professional development trainings.

Do you have suggestions about how the district leadership can improve as an organization?

In closing, teachers emphasized the importance of moral principles that govern a district’s behavior; its duty and obligation to serve the students, parents, community, and employees for the betterment of everyone. Brent, a high school teacher, responded, “I’m part of the campus improvement plan and district improvement plan, and we have things that are written down. But, we need to reach out and make it seem like we are actually, truly a team. Communication is the key, to be authentic. Don’t just put things on paper.” Maria, an elementary teacher, expressed, “There are a lot of things that the district does really well. I think we do well with parent involvement and programs. However, we need to look at each child individually instead of grouping them, be more creative. We need to hone in on what they need and narrow it down from there.” Qualities exhibited by the district’s leadership but need to improve, include

- being consistent in decision-making;
- having an open mind to new ideas;
- being inventive and a risk-taker;
- taking responsibility for one’s actions;
- being visible and staying connected.

Implications for Rural District Leadership

Aragon (2016) reported the biggest threat to Texas public schools is teacher shortage. Given the disparities identified in this study, it is not surprising that rural school districts are facing this challenge to a greater extent than their suburban and urban counterparts (Player, 2015). However, government agencies are beginning to get a clearer picture of the many obstacles rural school districts encounter and offer greater support. State agencies such as the Texas Rural Schools Task Force were created with the mission of identifying areas of concern and presenting best practices to leaders seeking solutions. For example, to address teacher retention, the Texas Rural Schools Task Force Report (Texas Education Agency, 2017) recommends the creation of a centralized, online statewide job

application and vacancy-matching site for districts and educators where applicants can indicate their preferences in terms of size, location, and subject area.

For rural districts, one of the most obvious solutions to retaining teachers is offering salaries competitive to wealthier districts (Osterholm, Horn, & Johnson, 2006). However, addressing matters of higher pay is more easily discussed than actually put into practice. As a result, rural schools frequently struggle to keep qualified teachers and at times make do with teachers who have fewer qualifications (Monk, 2007). To help make up for this salary disparity, providing other financial incentives may help, such as tuition support for career advancement, signing bonuses, and low interest loans for housing (Osterholm et al., 2006). Other benefits a district might consider are onsite childcare, employee wellness centers, and health-care services for families (Stark, 2019).

There are additional problems that rural schools must overcome, such as the perception of rural living as being undesirable. Despite the hardships faced, rural school leaders are in a better position than ever before to market to teachers the unique cultural lifestyle rural districts afford. Highlighting the allure of sparsely populated areas far from population centers to teachers is not as difficult as it seems. Removed from the hectic pace of urban settings, a rural lifestyle offers many inherent benefits, especially for those teachers with families. Having wide-open spaces with smaller populations also means having fewer students with smaller classes. Smaller classes, in turn, result in fewer discipline problems and a greater feeling of campus safety (Burton et al., 2013; Monk, 2007; Osterholm et al., 2006).

Another benefit of having smaller classes is teachers have greater flexibility in delivering instruction with a focus on individual student needs. Community relationships are often stronger, too. Teachers experience a greater sense of gratification from knowing all the students and their families, which also reduces the feeling of being socially isolated. In short, rural teachers are better able to guide student learning by leveraging the smaller class sizes and instructional autonomy that characterize many rural schools (Barton, 2012). Clearly, when it comes to retaining teachers, rural schools and their communities have numerous tools at their disposal.

The issues facing our nation's schools are undeniably complex and are complicated multiple factors. How does a principal, school district, or superintendent retain the best teachers? If leadership can better understand the factors that contribute to teachers choosing to remain in rural areas, they should be able to improve their strategies for retention; resulting in lower teacher turnover rates and reducing the costs associated with hiring and training new staff (Burton et al., 2013). Based on research conducted by Ulferts (2016) and the findings of this study, the following summarizes effective teacher retention strategies for rural school leaders

- offer competitive insurance packages;
- provide salaries commensurate with surrounding districts;
- award stipends for teachers who continue teaching in the district;
- provide assistance with finding housing or low interest loans to buy houses;
- create flexible scheduling including variable personal days;
- give financial assistance for advanced college degrees or additional endorsements;
- grant professional development opportunities including compensation for travel;
- hire teachers who live locally;
- provide mentor and support programs for new teachers;
- offer assistance for new teachers with student loan debt;
- advance marketing strategies that promote positive aspects of the district;
- expand student teacher placement programs;
- develop “Grow Your Own” teacher programs.

Many factors can influence a rural teacher’s decision to leave for a comparable position in a larger district: lack of professional development, fewer opportunities for advancement, isolation from peer groups, and added responsibilities that come from working in a smaller district with less support staff. Other circumstances may also influence a teacher deciding to stay, such as geographic isolation, lack of available housing, and limited social and cultural amenities. The consequences often result in rural schools with below-average numbers of highly trained teachers, which can lead to higher turnover rates and lower student achievement.

Conclusions

Teacher retention continues to be a concern in spite of a wealth of knowledge about the contributing factors associated with the dilemma. It is obvious that merely stating that a problem exists will not solve retention. Rather than waiting and hoping that educators will choose to stay in rural schools, it is time for rural district leaders to reinvigorate their efforts on retention. Additional energy needs to be expended on finding remedies enticing teachers to maintain a rural education lifestyle.

In many urban areas, there is a surplus of talented teachers but not enough jobs available to employ them. In rural areas, though, it can be extremely difficult to attract high quality teachers. Indeed hiring in general is tougher in rural areas, including job markets extending far beyond education. Rural life is not for everyone, and a life that is simpler can appear to some

people like a life less than fulfilling. Many services such as health care can be harder to obtain, there may be fewer cultural attractions compared to urban areas—the list of reasons why teachers might be discouraged from remaining in educational jobs in rural areas can be lengthy. In reality, rural life and rural teaching offers numerous benefits that one might be hard pressed to find in urban communities; including an environment that has a strong sense of community, is safer for families, has less pollution, and lower real estate costs. However, perceptions can be hard to overcome, which can leave rural school leaders struggling to keep quality teachers. The typical approach of offering higher pay or better benefits can often be difficult for rural schools to manage.

All of these hurdles contribute to the challenges rural school leaders encounter, particularly for keeping hard-to-staff positions. Leaders must take steps on ways proven successful in nurturing rural teachers and making their lives better. When teachers have a sense of belonging and can see the potential for career advancement, they are more likely to remain. Identifying teachers who understand and appreciate the positive aspects of rural life is one key to retaining rural educators. Building a dedicated highly qualified rural school staff requires a commitment from district leaders, local communities, and government agencies working collaboratively to create opportunities that incentivize teachers to stay.

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