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Rural Education: Attracting and Retaining Teachers in Small Schools

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For many small rural school districts across America, the effort to attract and retain quality teachers continues to be a major concern. Schools located in what are considered to be “hard to staff” areas experience the most difficulty. While not all communities face the problems of inadequate teacher supply, many small and rural school districts recognize this as a continuing critical issue. A variety of factors contribute to the problems of recruiting and retaining teachers in small and rural school. This article will address the most common causes of high turnover rate among teachers in the rural schools and offer a variety of strategies that may be considered by local school administrators.

The most critical factor to be considered in teacher recruitment and retention is that schools must be effective and provide teaching and learning environments that are attractive. Sergiovanni (2000) contended that school purpose, organization and operation must be centered on the beliefs and values embedded within the local community. A school's character is determined by how well it consistently reflects local culture, community and the individual needs and competencies of all stakeholders. No one wants to serve in a school district where the environment for teaching and learning is less than positive. Local school administrators must create meaning and purpose at work. They must ensure that “the people side of school” is the most important and that teachers are empowered by their own efficacy as professionals (Short & Greer, 1997). Strong educational leaders understand that a quality environment for teaching and learning in their schools is of the utmost importance in recruiting and retaining quality teachers.

Edmonds (1982) through his landmark research on effective schools defined a good school as having strong leadership, a climate of safety and order, a commitment to monitoring progress, high expectations for every student and a focus on teaching important skills. Other studies have expanded this list to include the following attributes of an effective school: (a) a safe environment that fosters teaching and learning; (b) a clearly identified school mission developed and shared by the staff that amplifies the school's commitment to a set of goals for instruction; (c) assessment procedures and accountability; (d) school administrators who are authentic instructional leaders; (e) high expectations for the learning of every student; (f) high time on task where students participate in planned activities to help them master basic skills; (g) frequent monitoring of student progress; and (h) a well developed program that involves parents in the basic mission of the school (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2002). Teachers who are happy with their jobs will perform better and are more likely to endure a few hardships in order to work in the district.

Welcome accountability

Central office and campus administrators are responsible for the success or failure of a district or school. As

principals and superintendents, they must provide the vision, leadership and direction that will ensure an excellent teaching and learning environment (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Leadership effectiveness will determine the school's success in providing the best services to students while developing strong community support (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000). School leaders can't blame others if their school district or campus is failing. They must accept the responsibility and be willing to be held accountable for the effectiveness level of their school.

Establish community building as a top priority

School leaders should foster and celebrate the “people side of school” by continuously working to enrich the culture and climate of their district or campus. Sergiovanni (2000) referred to this in part, as developing a community of practice and further implied that it may be the most effective way to improve your school. Building community involves fostering collegiality and support among faculty and staff. Teachers who are members of communities of practice have the opportunity to do a better job when their teaching is connected to other faculty members throughout the school. They have the opportunity to learn and share ideas together which help develop a common vision of teaching and learning.

Provide authentic mentoring for new teachers

School leaders must realize that beginning teachers are not finished products. Research (e.g. Estrada & Menchaca, under review) suggested that new teachers who leave the profession do so within the first five years of their employment, and many of these move on to other types of employment after only the first year. Efforts to provide effective mentoring programs appear to impact beginning teachers in at least three significant ways. First, mentoring will help new teachers adjust to the organization and philosophy of the school. Second, mentoring will foster self-confidence and give new teachers encouragement to not only remain in the district, but remain in the profession as well; and third, a sound mentoring program will allow new teachers to expand their teaching skills and knowledge-base

(Pan, Mutchler, Shapley, Bush & Glover, 2000). Mentoring should begin as soon as new teachers are hired and continue to some extent, for several years. The cadre of mentor/teachers should be well trained and provided with adequate support to be effective. Information on mentoring skills for teachers can be easily obtained via the Internet, through educational journals, and state departments of education. Some states maintain education service centers which provide workshops and other forms of staff development on teacher mentoring. It is important to understand that mentoring is not just a hit-or-miss process. It is ongoing and focused on providing as much support as possible. An authentic helpful and trusting relationship between the mentor and a beginning teacher may be the difference between their success or failure (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2004).

Invest in quality staff development

Studies have indicated that high-quality staff development programs lead to improved classroom teaching and employee retention, especially in small and rural schools (Rural Policy Matters, 2001). It is also fairly obvious that many of these efforts are hindered due to a shortage of funding, release time for staff participation, and an overall lack of program results. In response to these areas of need, the U.S. Department of Education Initiative on Teaching (2000) offered the following strategies to help schools improve their staff development programs: (a) commit more resources to staff development; (b) create job-embedded, collaborative, content-focused professional development opportunities that continue throughout the academic year; (c) implement year-long contracts for teachers to provide extra time for professional development, curriculum planning, and collaboration; (d) restructure the daily schedule to provide longer, uninterrupted times for teacher planning; (e) institute summer programs where teachers may become intellectually re-charged; and (f) evaluate program effectiveness based on improved teaching, improved learning, and narrowing student achievement gaps.

Budget for teacher recruiting

Even during these times when most school districts have to tighten their belts, adequate funding for an active recruiting program may be one of the most important items in a rural district's budget. In order to provide a good school, rural administrators must concentrate on recruiting good teachers. A sound recruiting program will evolve only if there is enough fiscal support provided to maintain it.

Focus on planning

In rural schools where recruiting and retaining teachers can be a difficult task, it is important that planning for

teacher recruiting be a continuous process. School administrators should establish goals and objectives for the district recruitment plan every year (Web & Norton, 2003). Members of all stakeholder groups should be involved at some point in this effort. Answer difficult questions such as: How much do we budget? What do our school and community have to offer? What are our values? What is our vision for the school district and campuses? What is our vision for students and learning? What is our vision for teachers and teaching? What is our vision for community? Why is our school a good school? Where do we look for new teachers? How do we keep the teachers we have? These and other questions cannot be answered overnight. It takes a continuous and focused effort from the entire learning community.

Offer incentives to teachers

Offering incentives to teachers has been a successful strategy for some rural school districts. Bonuses and salary increases appear to be the most popular in hiring and retaining new teachers; however, incentives should be available to teachers throughout their tenure with the school district. Teachers who have been in the district for five years or longer are more likely to remain than are teachers with fewer years in the district.

Consider a loan forgiveness plan for new teachers

According to information originating from the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (2004), loan forgiveness is an incentive some rural schools are offering new teachers. In these instances, school districts assume full or partial responsibility for payment of student loans and other less expensive debts for beginning teachers. School districts may contact lending institutions that have new teachers as clients and work with them to help decrease interest rates or consolidate loans. Districts may also approach their local depositories for assistance in this effort.

Provide housing for teachers

A major reason for high teacher turnover in rural schools is the lack of suitable living quarters. Teachers who must drive long distances to work because of a lack of housing are more likely to leave their positions than teachers who live in or near the community where their school is located. Some rural school districts provide housing (teacherages) for their professional employees. These living quarters are provided either free or at a nominal monthly rental charge. While this is advantageous to some districts, others find themselves encumbered with the business of managing and maintaining rental property. Maintenance and operation of teacherages can become a burden on the district and in many cases the houses/duplexes or apartments provided are in various stages of disrepair as the cost for operation and

upkeep becomes more and more expensive. In some rural districts housing for teachers is neglected to the extent that it ceases to be an incentive and becomes a liability. However, a recent strategy being undertaken by one outstanding rural school in East Texas may hold promise as a way to provide low-cost housing for teachers at little or no expense to the district. As reported by Diamond (2003), superintendent of schools, Dr. James Largent, the Rusk Independent School District (RISD) was experiencing heavy teacher turn-over because of a lack of suitable housing in the small community. Largent began exploring ways to elevate this problem and was introduced to a company (Architectural Concepts Inc.) located in Hurst, Texas, that helped communities establish a non-profit organization to build local apartments for teachers. The income from these units was used to cover construction costs, maintenance, and upkeep. The city of Rusk donated 20 acres of land on which the apartments will be built and which would also be used as a down payment on the construction loan. The project would comprise a 32 unit complex containing one, two, and three bedroom apartments that would rent from approximately \$400.00 to \$700.00 per month. It was estimated that rental fees at these rates would cover the cost of constructing the complex. It is important to note that under this strategy, the school district would not be financially encumbered in any way; the housing shortage for teachers will be lessened; and teachers will be more likely to remain in the Rusk Independent School District.

Develop a marketing strategy

Great recruiting starts with a great reputation. School districts should develop a marketing strategy that illuminates the positive elements of the school district, the community, and the surrounding area. Many districts enhance their public relations efforts through a well-designed web site that demonstrates the climate and culture of the school and community. Effective web pages provide a variety of interesting and helpful information to new and potential employees by highlighting student and employee accomplishments, demographics, and personnel information that includes an on-line application process, policies and regulations, calendars, and contacts. Web pages should be colorful, and include well-designed graphics that are easy to access and search, and in general, provide an authentic story about the school's vision for teaching and learning, the vision for students, the vision for teachers and auxiliary personnel, leadership philosophy, district and community values, expectations, and future plans. Web sites can be designed to provide potential employees with a wealth of information about the school district and community that can be found in no other way. Be classy and creative in this effort. Continually update information so the district and campus web sites are always current with reliable information. A well-designed web site can provide a window into a school district as no other media can. It can

be a powerful tool in the effort to recruit and maintain a strong teaching staff (Gallagher, Bagin & Moore, 2005).

Utilize the faculty and staff as recruiters

Current employees can sometimes be the greatest cheerleaders for the district recruitment program (Morehart, 2001). Allow them to be active participants in district recruiting efforts by sending them to meetings, conferences, teacher fairs and other activities where they may tell first hand the great story of their school. Develop slick, colorful brochures about the school and community and have them available at each campus, the central office, and other advantageous sites throughout the area. Hand them out at meetings and conferences and any other place that may be a source for teacher recruitment. The use of interactive CD-ROMs for teacher recruitment is becoming increasingly popular with many small and rural school districts. One outstanding example of their use can be seen by visiting the Davidson County, North Carolina school system web page (Gallagher, Bagin, & Moore, 2005).

Provide a school/community induction program for new teachers

In many cases when new teachers are hired, they hear very little from the school district until they begin work. Minimal effort is sometimes made by local school administrators to insure the teacher's transition to their new school and community is positive and as stress free as possible. Many times teachers are left to get there the best way they can and be ready to go to work when school starts. Districts that "take care" of their teachers begin the welcoming process the minute they sign a contract. Administrators should have an induction/assistance program in place for teachers who will be new to the school community (Rebore, 2004). The moment new teachers sign their contract the district should provide as much information about the school and community as possible. Many teachers are hired several months prior to their first day of work at their new school. During this interim, most newly hired teachers will be planning their move to the community and generally getting ready to begin work and life in a new place. This is a time to make them feel special, welcome, and appreciated. A little bit of relationship building will go a long way toward fostering positive attitudes and feelings of belonging among teachers when they arrive in their new surroundings. Send them weekly postcards or notes that simply relay the message that the school and community are looking forward to their arrival. Send them copies of newspapers or other information that will help inform them about their new community and school. Have a plan to help them find housing. Keep in touch with them and have someone available to meet them when they arrive. Help them unload the U-Haul. Celebrate their arrival when school starts with a reception. In short,

do everything possible to make them feel excited about becoming a part of the school district and community. Remember, the success of a school depends upon the way faculty and staff feel about working there.

Form Cooperatives

Work with other rural school districts for the purpose of fostering the recruiting effort. By doing this, some schools are able to broaden their recruiting effectiveness and lessen the impact on an already stressed budget. Help develop partnerships with teacher training institutions that serve your area. Provide them with current information so they may be able to encourage prospective teachers to investigate the great things the school district has to offer. Encourage administrators and teachers to volunteer as presenters in university teacher preparation classes. Most programs welcome class presentations from practitioners who can provide a real-world perspective in dealing with current educational problems and issues. This will not only be of benefit to the students, but should serve to further expose the special attributes of the school district.

Don't neglect the locals

Many school districts are able to grow their own teachers by having active and dynamic future teacher clubs in their schools. This is an excellent way to introduce students to the teaching profession and to provide an opportunity for them to live and work in their local communities after they become certified (Rural and Community Trust, 2001). Encourage retired teachers to return to the classroom. Various states allow retired educators to teach at least half-time, and in some cases, full-time. Identifying these members of the community and inviting them to consider a return to teaching may help alleviate the teacher shortage and add strength and diversity to the instructional program. Teachers retire for a variety of reasons and it may well be that there are several outstanding retirees living in the area who would love to have the chance to return to the classroom. Alternative routes to teacher certification are available in most states and there may be persons in local communities who meet the qualifications for attaining alternative certification. As part of a sound recruitment and retention plan, insure that information about alternative paths to teacher certification is available to all members of the community.

Summary

Teacher recruitment and retention is of critical importance to most rural school districts. During these times of small budgets and unfunded federal mandates, it is necessary that rural school districts develop a dynamic structure for finding and keeping good teachers. Most rural schools and communities can offer teachers a wonderful

lifestyle and a great place to work; however, many prospective employees never receive information that highlights the positive benefits of living and teaching in a small community. To combat this trend, rural districts should consider teacher recruiting and retention to be an integral component of the total school program by initiating bold strategies designed to attract and retain the best teachers possible. Considering the recruiting effort to be an on-going educational priority will surely enhance the number and quality of the rural school instructional staff.

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