

Finders Keepers: Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT

Rural schools are fighting for survival. Competition for excellent teachers is fierce. This article discusses recruitment and retention strategies found in the literature. Suggestions are made for innovative recruitment and retention techniques. An underlying task requires communicating with prospective teachers the benefits of teaching in rural schools.

Introduction

Rural schools are fighting for their lives. Having successfully met many past challenges related to demographic, social, and policy changes, teachers and administrators in those schools beyond our urban and suburban borders now face perhaps the greatest challenge of all – and there's a deadline for meeting it. Schools are required to have a "highly qualified teacher," a content expert in every classroom, according to the *No Child Left Behind* initiative

(U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Many teachers in rural venues currently teach two or more subjects, and credentialing might be an issue. The new requirement will require a variety of strategies. We must recruit new teachers with the required subject matter expertise, as well as supporting current teachers in meeting new content specialist requirements.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to explore the special challenges that rural schools face as they struggle to recruit and retain quality teachers. We discuss recruitment and retention strategies for making rural teaching placements more appealing to prospective faculty. Comments from an online focus group comprised of seven current or previous rural schoolteachers help personalize the issues.

Competition for Good Teachers Is Suddenly Fierce

Approximately one of every three children in the United States receives her/his education "in hamlets or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people," according to Belsie (2003, p. 18). Other sources suggest that 59 million people in our country live in rural areas, with 21% of students enrolled in rural schools (Davis, 2004). Various denotations of the word "rural" exist, with the Government Accountability Office defining small, rural districts as those "55 miles or farther from a metropolitan area and with enrollments of 300 or fewer students" (p. 24). Depending on one's definition of rural, then, statistics will differ. One fact is clear – a significant number of our students are attending rural schools, yet lawmakers and educational strategists spend considerably more time and greater resources investigating and testing remedies in urban and suburban venues, rendering rural schools relatively "invisible." Due to new regulations and looming deadlines for compliance, competition for good teachers is suddenly fiercer than ever, and the smaller budgets and invisibility characteristic of rural schools render them less fit for the battle.

As advocates for *place-based education*, we believe that rural schools are well worth the effort required to save them. The task at hand requires communicating with prospective rural teachers regarding the satisfaction and fulfillment that teaching beyond the city limits can offer them. For every recruiting initiative, we believe retention incentives should be in place to reward teachers currently "in the trenches." A review of recent literature suggests diverse approaches to making rural schools more appealing to both pre-service and seasoned public school teachers.

Recruiting Teachers for Rural Schools Is Complex

Though teaching in rural venues offers wonderful experiences and true advantages, recruiters for such positions face special challenges. "The decision to teach in a rural district can require teachers to maintain multiple certifications while living far from the nearest university and preparing for and teaching several different classes each day, all at a salary that may be thousands of dollars less than one's suburban or urban counterparts" ("Finding and keeping," 2004, p. 74). The process of recruiting teachers for rural schools is a complex process. We believe the task is surmountable if significant areas are addressed and progressive strategies employed. Below are several strategies for successful recruitment.

Financial Incentives

The most obvious recruiting tool for rural schools would be to offer salaries competitive with those in larger, richer venues. As Goldberg and Proctor suggest, "We need to make it economically feasible for individuals to choose teaching" (2000, p. 6). According to a national survey conducted in 2003, more rural school superintendents consider low salaries a major obstacle to recruiting teachers than any other single factor ("Finding and keeping," 2004). Seven Texas teachers currently or formerly employed in rural schools comprised an online focus group for this paper, with members offering opinions on the positive and negative aspects of such employment. Surprisingly, none of the individuals in our teacher focus group mentioned salary as a drawback to teaching in rural schools. However, other indicators suggest that salary is a major issue for prospective teachers. Salary levels might impact recruitment in an indirect way as well, since higher pay affects the perceived status of teachers, thus making the profession more appealing to prospective rural teachers.

Salary equity is more easily touted than accomplished, however, and rural districts must look to other financial incentives as well in order to level the teaching field. Possibilities include tuition support in exchange for time commitment to a rural district, loan forgiveness, and signing bonuses. Though such incentives might be offered to all desirable candidates, "nurturing local talent" might prove especially effective ("Finding and keeping," 2004, p. 74). "Locals" to whom tuition support and other financial assistance might be extended include "high school students, out-of-field teachers, school paraprofessionals, and second-career adults" (p. 74). As already established members of the rural community, such individuals might be highly motivated to complete the training required to qualify for teaching positions.

Richard (2004) suggests an innovative strategy for recruiting *families* with children who would *attend* rural schools. In several communities in Kansas, families with school-aged children were provided land for homesteading. We suggest a parallel strategy for attracting teachers to rural areas – land and home ownership seem powerful incentives for moving to rural areas and "staying put." Additionally, such programs address the housing shortage issue noted by rural superintendents ("Finding and keeping," 2004). This and other housing initiatives would

engage new teachers on several levels, including financial investment, community connection, and a sense of permanence and belonging to the "place" in which they live and work.

Advantages of the Rural Teaching Experience

Marketing the rural experience is of important in recruiting new teachers. Advantages should be emphasized. The disadvantages of rural living and rural teaching that people sometimes cite should be dealt with honestly, and compensatory aspects of the "good life" should be part of that discussion.

Fear of social isolation is one problematic issue for many teachers considering rural districts ("Finding and keeping," 2004). Rural schools can turn this seeming "negative" into a true "positive" by touting the advantages of living apart from the hustle and bustle of urban and suburban venues with their higher crime rates, stress levels, and the sense of anonymity and lack of connection that people in crowded areas often experience.

Spreading the Good News

Spreading the good news should focus on the sense of community in rural schools. "Anonymity is not part of the lifestyle" in rural areas, according to Green (2000, p. 19). She adds that "rural schools have something that no amount of money pumped through a pedagogic think tank can recreate: a sense of community that you simply can't escape." Other experts opine, "knowing all the students and their families can be a delight. You will learn to enjoy, even love your 'extended family'" (Rehrauer, Jasper, Kampfe, & McBryde, 2004, p. 25). Since "the school serves as the community's social heart" (Parker, 2004, p. 2), teachers are often given special status within the community. Recruiters should convey the sense of family so often apparent in rural areas, pointing out that prospective teachers might feel *less* rather than *more* socially isolated.

Fewer Classroom Management Problems in Rural Locations

Rural locations offer other advantages, which should be made apparent to prospects during the recruiting process. Wide-open spaces with smaller populations obviously result in fewer school children and smaller classes. Focus group members repeatedly noted the advantages of better student-teacher ratios in rural schools. Fewer class management problems were also cited as deriving from the smaller classes. One focus group participant went so far as to say, "There were almost no discipline problems." Others noted that teaching in rural schools is safer than in other situations.

Personal Connectedness

On a related note involving personal connectedness, one rural teacher in the focus group said, "In rural schools, where most everyone knows each other and their families, there is always someone helping to keep track of students and their actions." Viewing this ability to monitor as a major force in keeping students on the right track, the teacher added: "No matter how great an education program is, if a child is into the wrong scene – be it drugs, gangs, etc. – the program will not save them unless there is an able, caring individual" who knows the student well and is emotionally invested in that student.

Making a Difference – Focusing on Individual Instruction

An additional advantage of classes with fewer members is that teachers can focus on individual students and individualized instruction. One teacher in the focus group stated that she chose rural teaching because she felt that she could really "make a difference" in such a setting. One-on-one instruction was noted by another individual with rural school experience. According to Richard (2004), students in rural schools enjoy and thrive on the extra attention teachers are able to give. Other small-school advantages noted are opportunities to participate in sports and plays. In relation to the high school in a small community of 400 people, Richard asserts, "virtually everyone graduates" (p. 2). All these positive aspects of teaching in a rural venue should be emphasized to candidates, with evidence to support the claims readily available.

An Innovative Recruitment Strategy

We propose an innovative recruitment strategy that involves students, teachers, and parents in the process. Though administrators typically interview prospective instructors, interaction with representatives from other stake holding groups might be more effective. Recruiting teams comprised of individuals in all groups noted above should be the first point of contact, in our view. Other community members might be valuable in this context as well. Such an approach will personalize the process, as well as demonstrating the *unity in community*.

Lest the team concept become overwhelming to the candidate, structure should be developed for the interaction. The emotional comfort of the interviewee is paramount, so the process should not be overly rehearsed or rigid. The goal is to show the prospect the type of environment they will enjoy as a rural teacher, and to put faces on the individuals in rural districts. We believe that most teachers go into their profession because they love students and want to make a difference in their lives. Rural school students might be especially engaging and effective in this context.

The strategy outlined above can be used with recruitment both on college campuses and on-site interviews. Large districts sometimes send recruiters to universities and job fairs in an effort to make contact with the best and brightest pre-service teachers. Smaller schools might follow suit by sending a team of recruiters rather than one individual.

Cooperation, Power, Authority, and Financial Incentives

Cooperation of administrators is necessary for this type of recruitment. Some might be loath to yield what they view as power and authority in this regard. We are convinced that interaction between prospective teachers and the individuals with whom they will live and work will enhance recruitment outcomes. Final hiring decisions will likely remain the purview of administration.

Offering financial incentives, emphasizing the positive aspects of rural living, and building a sense of community from the first interaction with prospective teachers are just three strategies for successful recruitment. Schools that encourage thinking "outside the box" might certainly develop creative recruiting strategies that work well for them. Supportive and progressive administrators will facilitate creative programs.

Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools

According to Lewis (2003), "the real source of the [teacher] shortage problem is teacher turnover" (p. 72). Once teachers are recruited, it is imperative their work environment meet their needs in order to retain these individuals. Experienced teachers are assets to the overall educational program. Three categories of focus by the administration are necessary to address the retention objective.

Administrators Need to Focus on Three Categories

The *first* category involves frequent job analysis to determine if the actual duties of the teaching position are similar to those of competitors or non-rural schools. One of the most frequent complaints by rural teachers is the heavy workload that develops from multiple preparations. To alleviate this complaint, it would be useful for school districts to develop or purchase manuals that already have class preparations, as well as handouts, if available. Multiple advantages would derive from this approach. Administration could be assured that local and state guidelines were being followed. Such materials, if designated by dates, would ensure that

teachers did not get behind or overwhelmed. More time could be devoted to individual student needs. Those teachers wishing to construct individualized preparations would be able to do so. The standardized preparations would simply be available if necessary, reducing the overall workload that exists with multiple preparations.

Other aspects of job analysis could determine if extracurricular activities were burdening the rural educator. Often teachers are required to sponsor clubs, activities that result in competition, and so on. One former rural teacher in our focus group remarked that in addition to five preparations, she "also directed the one-act play, coached most of the UIL academic contests, sponsored the student council, sponsored the school newspaper, and was a class sponsor." One way to alleviate such pressure on rural teachers is to recruit parent volunteers to work with students in some of these activities. Such delegation of duties might even serve to strengthen the community-school relationship.

Workload and work time must be reviewed periodically to ensure that teachers are not becoming overwhelmed, burned out, or otherwise compromised. With this sort of proactive intervention, the teacher realizes that administration respects her/him as an important professional. Administration must be proactive in identifying these problems prior to their development; after the fact, identification of such troubles will not be as helpful in retaining teachers.

The *second* category involves ways to retain valuable professionals by establishing support groups for educators. These might be formalized or they might simply be regular gatherings where teachers have an opportunity to get acquainted. For example, such groups might simply be extensions of faculty meetings where refreshments are served and faculty can discuss in a supportive environment any unique problems that they might be having. Small districts might also plan social events with other nearby districts to enhance the community of teachers. This might be especially beneficial to single teachers who might otherwise believe that they can only meet potential partners in larger school environments. When individuals enjoy close friendships within the workplace, they are more likely to remain at that job. They have a tendency to develop loyalty for the school district where they work and live. Once loyalty has been established, only extreme circumstances might prevent the teacher from staying with the district.

The *third* category involves benefits and rewards. While some administrators view this area as a potential drain upon limited funding, rather inexpensive methods do exist. Retention is usually less expensive than recruitment. The investment the school has made in recruitment activities is "protected" when teachers choose to remain.

Unique Ways to Offer Benefit Plans

As noted previously, the best-case scenario includes benefit packages, including salaries, comparable to those from non-rural school districts. There are unique ways to offer benefit plans. Analogous to the example given in the recruitment section, a benefit might include the provision of an acre or some portion of land after a specified term of employment. For beginning teachers in particular, land upon which they might build a house and begin rearing a family would be an

incentive to remain employed with a specific district. No interest home loans could also be provided to the educators through the district. Such a gift might be expensive to a school district but, again, the price of a tract of land where teachers could build homes would likely be less expensive than mandatory recruiting each year or the consequences of struggling with the consequences of retaining an inadequate number of educators.

It should be noted that rural educators have special needs that might require special funding. Teacher organizations should not be reluctant to lobby the state legislature for additional funds to support recruitment and retention (Piercynski, Matranga, & Peltier, 1997). New mandates related to the *No Child Left Behind* program must be met. Extra funding might be required to do so.

Other benefits might be vacation packages for teachers who complete a specific number of years with a school district. For example, educators who have completed 3, 5, 7, 9 (and so on) years might have travel expenses and hotel lodging provided free. Making this a group vacation again instills camaraderie, a sense of community, and loyalty to the district.

Research Suggest Most Meaningful Rewards

Research suggests the most meaningful rewards are those that are intrinsic in nature. Intrinsic rewards typically appeal to the individual's sense of accomplishment. Santrock (2000) suggests that to be intrinsically motivated is to have "the internal desire to be competent and to do something for its own sake" (p. 562). Methods that reinforce those desires are more likely to have substantial reinforcing properties. An example would be for the district to present certificates, plaques, or trophies as awards for outstanding performance or service. Though there is a tangible aspect to such reinforcers, they might well be valued much more than gifts or money, allowing recipients to internalize the sense of accomplishment that derives from hard work and success. Even a simple "teacher of the month" award that provides a special parking spot or some other privilege or acknowledgment might function as a vital incentive to remain with a particular school district. The teacher is recognized for her/his efforts in a way that is also apparent to the community. Understanding the inner needs of teachers employed within a particular district – and creative thinking – are necessary in developing effective rewards that encourage retention.

Four Factors Necessary in Retaining Special Education Teachers

Billingsley (2004a) identifies four factors that are necessary in retaining special education teachers, and we believe that they apply to rural teachers as well. These are:

1. responsive induction programs
2. deliberate role design
3. positive work conditions and supports
4. professional development opportunities (p. 370)

Responsive induction programs involve providing support for teachers who are beginning their careers (Billingsley, 2004a). Such programs attempt to prevent an early exit from the profession. Hope (1999) agrees that orientation programs conducted by the principal and continuous induction activities throughout the first year will increase the likelihood that the beginning teacher will stay employed with that school.

Supportive agendas for the novice teacher should also involve mentorship programs. More experienced teachers are paired with new educators. This provides an invaluable resource with regard to the practice of education, and it also allows the new employee to learn the informal rules that may exist within a school setting. With regard to the special environment of the rural school, a mentor might provide valuable information regarding local resources and opportunities. Having contacts who can answer questions regarding local mechanics, doctors, and even grocery store locations alleviates some of the stress of living in a new location. Bobek (2002) suggests that this increases the resiliency of the teacher in terms of coping with the specific demands of rural life. In other words, stressors in the teaching environment might be reduced through mentorship plans.

Role design as described by Billingsley (2004a) acknowledges the necessity of clearly defining expectations and perhaps job obligations. This overlaps to a degree the previous section regarding ensuring that new teachers are not overwhelmed by various duties. Billingsley emphasizes proactive analysis of position requirements.

According to Billingsley (2004a), positive work conditions and supports are equally important. Such a work environment encompasses many aspects. Not only might it include supportive plans from the administration but also a teamwork mentality among colleagues. Additionally, a description of this milieu would involve the friendliness of the community toward the educators of community children.

Billingsley (2004a) emphasizes professional development as a method of retention for her targeted group of special education educators, while Lewis (2003) suggests that this attrition-reduction strategy has considerably broader application. She states that "teachers also need compensation for acquiring and deepening knowledge and skills that contribute to improved student achievement" (p. 72). McGlamery and Edick (2004) also recommend professional development as a tool to retain teachers, especially those who are likely to burn out after only two years in the profession. It appears that when school districts support additional professional development, the faculty members view this as an indication of administration's belief in their worth and professionalism. In other words, the administration sees faculty as a professional group with special expertise.

Participation in Professional Organizations Is Important

According to teachers in rural venues, participation in professional organizations is essential to remaining connected to colleagues in other locations. Schools might subsidize membership dues to encourage these activities. Interactions with other professionals via listservs are valuable tools as well (Rehrauer, Jasper, Kampfe, & McBryde, 2004). Since one rural disadvantage consistently reported is lack of technology and Internet access, schools might invest in equipment and services in order to facilitate the professional growth and development of teachers.

Treating Faculty with Respect Helps to Retain Teachers

Based on their research in the state of Georgia, Inman and Marlow (2004) argue that one method of retention might well be out of the hands of the school district. Their data suggest that when a community treats the faculty of their local schools with respect, teachers are more likely to stay put. The school district can encourage community respect. One useful tool involves dissemination of information as a technique for promoting faculty respect. An example would be to provide the community with newsletters noting the accomplishments of both students and the faculty. Short biographical essays noting a particular teacher's endeavors, undertakings, and educational history will introduce him or her as a professional to the community.

Interestingly, the same results were found in similar research conducted in England (Rhodes, Nevill, & Allan, 2004). Minerik, Thornton, and Perreault also address the importance of community interaction (2003). They note specifically that it is vital to "enhance relationships within the educational community and promote connectedness with the larger community" in order to retain teachers (p. 231). Richard (2004) concurs, stating that rural areas can be "renewed...by drafting members of the community into more active roles in the schools" (p. 5). As noted in the recruitment section of this paper, that sense of community comes more easily in rural than urban venues. Promoting these connections can only enhance outcomes.

Four Areas Associated With Teacher Attrition and Retention

In a thematic review of the research literature, Billingsley (2004b) identified four areas associated with teacher attrition and retention. These included:

1. teacher characteristics and personal factors
2. teacher qualifications
3. work environment
4. teachers' affective reactions to work (p. 39)

Her analysis supports previously cited research with regard to retention and recruitment. One factor that has not been discussed is the impact that educator selection might have on retention. This factor addresses both recruitment and retention, and elucidates an important link between the two processes. Applicants who have family in the area or who have experience living in rural areas might be more likely to remain in such a school setting. Asking specific questions regarding the rural school experience could lead to insight regarding the prospective teacher's long-range plans, an important factor in retention. In other words, regardless of the retention techniques utilized, a problematic mismatch between applicant and school almost guarantees that the "marriage" will not survive.

The importance of retention for any school district cannot be overestimated. As Minerick, Thornton, and Perreault (2003) note:

The attrition of young teachers is a terrible loss of human capital. It disrupts program continuity, hinders student learning, and increases costs. In essence, attrition of new teachers is a major barrier to continuous school program, thereby creating ceiling effects for student achievement. We believe that teaching can and should be a lifelong career. (p. 234)

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, new education initiatives and associated changes are required. Rural schools face their greatest challenges to date in the current atmosphere. Innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining good teachers in rural schools will be needed in order to meet these challenges. Rural schools are "good things" in small packages, crucibles in the country, wherein important growth, change, and life lessons take place. We must fight to save them.

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