

Recruitment & Retention of Teachers in Rural South Carolina

APRIL 2020 WORKING PAPER SERIES I

Challenges of teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas continue to plague our nation. South Carolina is no exception. Identifying promising practices to meet these challenges is critical as 24% of our nation's students and 40% of our South Carolina students are educated in rural schools. Furthermore, the poverty rate is substantial with 19% of our nation's rural students living below poverty.

Nationally, 57% of districts and 32% of public schools are rural, and they educate about 12 million U.S. students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Unfortunately, recruiting and retaining effective rural teachers is often particularly challenging. In a national survey of rural district administrators in 44 states, more than 84% of administrators said they experienced at least some difficulty in filling teaching vacancies, while more than half of the respondents reported "moderate" to "extreme" difficulty (Dadisman, Gravelle, Farmer, & Petrin, 2010). The most challenging factors related to retaining teachers include proximity to a higher paying district (29.1%), geographic isolation (25.5%), low/uncompetitive salaries (24.8%), and social isolation (20.8%). Despite these challenging factors, rural teachers average nine years at one school, compared to the national average of 8.4 years for all public schools.

In the working paper, we discuss challenges facing rural schools associated with teacher recruitment and retention, highlight the most common practices identified through a comprehensive literature review and search of information from local and national organizations focused on rural education, and conclude with recommendations for identifying ways to meet these challenges. While we include the national perspective, we also specifically examine these areas of focus from a South Carolina centric lens.

+ SOUTH CAROLINA

- Schools in rural South Carolina communities have an average enrollment of only 353 students, which translates to fewer teachers per grade level and fewer specialized personnel at the school level (Barton, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) categorizes rural into three subtypes – fringe, distant, and remote – that differentiate rural locations based on the distance and size of the nearest urban area. South Carolina has 298 schools designated as rural fringe (5 miles or fewer from an urban area of at least 50,000 and 2.5 miles or fewer from an urban area of no more than 50,000). South Carolina has 203 schools labeled as rural distant (no more than 25 miles from an urban area of at least 50,000 and no more than 10 miles from an urban area of no more than 50,000). Lastly, South Carolina has seven schools identified as rural remote (more than 25 miles from an urban area of at least 50,000 and more than 10 miles from an urban area of no more than 50,000).
- South Carolina experiences similar challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers in rural communities as does the rest of our nation. Efforts for recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools nationally as well as in South Carolina were identified and reviewed. Three types of South Carolina efforts that align with national trends include (a) better preparing teachers for teaching in rural and remote locations, (b) offering financial incentives, and (c) nurturing "grow-your-own" (GYO) programs that train paraprofessionals already working in rural schools or target aspiring teachers who want to return to their home communities after receiving their degrees. Although efforts identified for recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools across the nation and in South Carolina were similar, initiatives in both contexts have extremely limited research support and have produced mixed results.

+ RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Context matters!**

The term “rural” is often used to describe any area that is not urban; however, since one size does not fit all in describing rural communities, teacher recruitment and retention challenges may vary greatly from one rural community to the next and should be considered when developing plans for recruitment and retention that are context-specific. While the smallest rural schools may grapple with limited instructional staff, which necessitates recruiting teachers with multiple endorsements, more remote schools face higher transportation costs that can siphon resources away from other budget items such as teacher salaries. Distance to urban areas and small school size can make it more challenging to provide individualized services for students with special needs and specialized interventions for students with limited English proficiency.

- **Better prepare teachers for teaching in rural and remote locations by partnering with universities to serve as the conduit for supporting this preparation.**

There are several examples from various states reviewed in the full working paper that offer reduced in-state tuition (funded through federal grants and other forms of subsidy), utilize technology for coursework through distance education (to reduce the travel requirements for on-site courses), and/or have developed a partnership between rural community colleges and the state university as bridge programs.

- **Offering financial incentives is commonly used but effects of programs that offer financial incentives have not been rigorously evaluated and have produced mixed results.**

Many programs offer bonuses, stipends, loan programs, and housing assistance to attract teachers to hard-to-staff, rural schools and districts; however, systematic evaluation of these efforts need to be conducted to determine their effectiveness and overall impact.

- **Grow-Your-Own (GYO) programs that train professionals already working in rural schools or target aspiring teachers who want to return to their home communities after receiving their degree should be nurtured.**

Studies have repeatedly shown a strong, positive correlation between location of current teaching position and location of hometown, high school, or college (Monk, 2007). It is important to note, however, that despite the seemingly widespread call for a GYO approach, it appears that not all GYO programs are inherently successful.

- **Rigorous research and evaluation of programmatic efforts for rural teacher recruitment and retention is what is most needed in order to identify recommended practices.**

Systematic research and evaluation studies are limited, which have yielded conflicting results in promising practices. Thus, in order to identify recommended practices, research studies need to be conducted that focus directly on the impact and fidelity of these strategies.

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