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Abstract

Recruiting and retaining teachers in rural, geographically-isolated states is an increasingly challenging enterprise. The districts considered in this study vary according to rural designation, prosperity, diversity, population density, access to goods and services, and industry; however, they confront many of the same obstacles to the recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers. This study employed semi-structured interviews to capture the perceptions, held by principals and superintendents, of the challenges and affordances of state- and locally-based initiatives to improve recruitment strategies and increase retention rates of teachers in predominantly rural or predominantly Native (Native American) districts. Findings of this study suggest certain content areas are difficult to staff which is supported by previous research. The challenges cited for both recruitment and retention include: lack of affordable housing, family connections, teachers lacking the requisite flexibility and commitment to differentiation, changing candidate characteristics, and candidate prospects. Recommendations include establishing a systematic state-wide plan for recruitment, tiered mentoring for retention, school-university partnerships, grow-your-own strategies, and affordable housing incentives.

Keywords

recruitment, retention, rural schools, teacher supply and demand

Introduction

Recruiting and retaining highly qualified certified teachers continues to present challenges for districts in rural areas (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Lazarev, Toby, Zacamy, Lin, & Newman, 2017; Monk, 2007; Sawchuck, 2018), particularly in districts designated as remote and distant rural areas with limited access to goods, transportation and social experiences. Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado (2005) note that:

Rural-specific literature identifies four challenges related to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas: (1) lower pay; (2) geographic and social isolation; (3) difficult working conditions such as having to teach classes in multiple subject areas; and (4) NCLB requirements for highly qualified teachers. (p. vii)

Other research (Adams & Woods, 2015; Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula, 2011) adds understanding the community, lack of resources, and overlap between personal and professional lives to the challenges of retention of teachers in remote rural areas. While there is literature to support the concerns of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural states, there exists a gap in research on principal and superintendent perceptions of challenges, affordances, and effective strategies for meeting staffing needs. This study aims to address that gap by exploring principal and superintendent perceptions of the challenges and affordances of recruitment and retention of teachers in a Midwest rural state.

While tenure may be obtained in three years, in this study principals and superintendents define retention as remaining in the same district for at least five years. Though teachers may transfer between and among schools, they are considered *retained* if they remain in the same district, according to the participants in this study. Five years is the time after which principals and superintendents in this state report that teachers have decided to remain in the community or as they stated, "we keep them". When asked how retention data is collected and recorded, all participants indicated that this information is collected and used at the district level. They do not report this information to the state to their knowledge, nor do they retrieve retention information from the state. Thus, each district in this study reports that they design their own recruitment and retention plans based on their own data.

Methodology

Three research questions guided this study:

(1) What do principals and superintendents perceive to be the challenges of recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in this rural Midwest state?
(2) What do principals and superintendents perceive to be the affordances of recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in this rural Midwest state?
(3) What do principals and superintendents perceive to be effective strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers in this rural Midwest state?

Description of Site

As some researchers suggest, all rural areas are not alike, thus one must be careful to describe each setting (Goff & Bruecker, 2017; Monk, 2007; Sawchuk, 2018). This Midwest state is designated predominately remote rural (census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster) for public school districts (NCES, 2018). However, the districts in this study include those that are remote rural, distant rural, fringe rural, remote town, and distant town (Appendix A). Some of the towns in this study have a population of 200 while others exceed 100,000. That said, many of the themes were common across types of districts, notwithstanding districts with higher populations of students whose

primary language is not English, who are Native, or who are migrated refugees. According to NCES (2018) categories, this state has 96 remote rural, 27 distant rural, and four fringe rural public school districts. Thirteen are remote town and six are distant town public school districts. The others are two city and one suburban school district. The remote rural and distant rural report the most challenges in recruitment and retention.

Sample Selection

To select participants for this study I employed a purposive sampling method to select participants for the study. I asked professors in the educational leadership program at a state university (in this midwestern state) to use certain criteria to identify candidates for participation to ensure the sample was composed of individuals, (a) currently employed as principal or superintendent in this state; (b) not enrolled in one of our educational leadership programs; (c) representative of a variety of regions and district designations in the state. This left me with a sample of nine that included elementary principals, secondary principals, superintendents, and one human resources director. As each district is sufficiently unique enough to potentially be identifiable, I provide no further description of the specific districts other than the NCES designations; I have also taken care to omit information that risks making a district identifiable.

Data Collection

I contacted each potential interviewee via e-mail that included the fact that the recipient had been recommended by a faculty member. A follow up e-mail and/or a phone call increased the number of responses I received. To ensure consistency, I chose to conduct all of the interviews by telephone and scheduled the interviews to accommodate the schedule of each participant; further, I did not provide participants with the interview questions prior to the interview.

For the interview itself, I read from the approved script and asked each participant the same set of questions, with follow-up questions included for the sole purpose of soliciting additional information or clarification, as needed. I recorded each telephone interview, which I subsequently transcribed verbatim, using an external transcription service. The transcripts will be in my personal files for three years, as permitted by each participant. After nine interviews I determined that saturation had been reached, with notable contextual differences; to wit, I judged that additional interviews would provide no additional insights to the topic at hand.

Data Analysis

After a careful reading of each transcript involving marginal notations, I began the data analysis. Emergent themes were identifiable upon the initial reading. To increase the validity of my observation of the emergent themes, I asked two additional persons to read the de-identified transcripts. As I am relatively new to the state, I wanted to ensure that my research adequately captured the nuances of both cultures, rural and Midwestern, respectively. One of the readers lives and works in the state and has experience with teaching and administration. The other reader is a doctoral student, with teaching and administrative experience from two rural states, one Midwestern and the other northern Pacific. To either confirm or enrich the significance of the data, I compared the documented perceptions (after reading) with the emergent themes that I had already

identified; this facilitated confirmation of my initial identification of the emergent themes and furnished the study with additional insights. Finally, I analyzed the data in considerable detail, by participant, by question, and by topic, regarding recruitment and retention as two discrete objects of analysis.

Pursuant to identification of emergent themes, I entered the transcripts into NVivo Pro 11, to ascertain the incidence of emergent themes and frequency of certain words. Initially, I entered entire transcripts as single documents, after which I entered the sections on recruiting separately from those on retention. Subsequently, I checked each frequently-identified word, to ensure that the words had been furnished in response to the questions and had been spoken by the interviewee.

Findings

Recruitment

Challenges. Principals and superintendents in this study described the challenges of recruiting highly qualified teachers as a perceived limited pool of candidates; preference of candidates to relocate to areas in which family members live; difficult to staff content areas; preference of candidates to relocate to areas with greater access to goods, salaries, and social experiences.

Table 1. Emergent Themes for Recruitment

Challenges	Strategies
Smaller pool of candidates	Earlier identification of needs, state application
Candidate proximity to home/family	Grow-your-own, teacher pathways
Career and technical educators	Personal connections
Lower salaries/benefit packages	State attempt to adjust through funding formula

Smaller pool of candidates. The principals and superintendents believe that there has been an increase in the need to recruit candidates to their districts during the past ten years. However, when prompted about recruitment strategies, the use of the word "recruit," "recruitment," or "recruiting" in the prompt, interviewees tended to use the term applicants and think more in terms of applications for positions than about the absence or presence of intentional recruitment strategies.

Participants mentioned the state employment opportunity website as the most common place to seek candidates and university job fairs as another avenue for potential candidates. Both of these avenues for a candidate pool are applicant driven not recruitment driven. One principal described the increasing need to recruit teachers in this way:

> I've noticed, yeah, it's changed a ton. I can go back to when I was an aspiring teacher looking for a teaching job. I remember going to --- Teacher Job Fair. They call it the big job fair. They still have one now. When you go there, you'd go with your resume. You'd wear your suit, dress up nice, and you'd stop at every booth and tell them why you'd think you'd be a great candidate, and they needed to hire you because of this, this, and this. You had some form of demonstrating the skills that you could bring to their district.

> The way that's changed is now that you go, the school districts are doing that. The candidate's shopping, and the school districts are saying 'You know, here's a coffee mug. Here's how we're different than any other district. Here's what we can do for you, this, this, and this. You know, here's what we have in place'. It's really changed from …. in my perspective, it's completely flip flopped.

One superintendent described it as, "the competitive edge in the …. area is pretty intense, and so you want to be out early so that you don't lose teachers, the top-end teachers, especially if you are grabbing young ones". One commented, "It used to be people would be willing to teach anywhere in [region]. Now, they might say, 'no, I only want to work in a high-income school" …they have a preference about where they want to be". So, there is an increased need to recruit in some areas more than others, particularly in remote rural areas without access to an urban-center environment. Participants did not describe an intentional plan to actively recruit candidates from other states. As further evidence of in-state recruitment, one principal remarked that, he was "wary" of applicants from other states. He wondered why they would apply to this state, it appeared that their efforts were more "random than targeted". The number of errors on the application also signaled a casual interest. One principal expressed a hesitation to hire candidates from out of state by suggesting:

> Right or wrong, I'm not a big fan of the random applicant who is in Kentucky or wherever and just sees a position and then just throws his information at it… [the] pattern of poor application materials from out-of-state applicants makes me wary of that group.

Two strategies described by the distant and remote town districts were to develop stronger partnerships with university teacher preparation programs and a new teacher pathway program which starts as a high school course to encourage a grow your own approach, particularly for diverse candidates.

Participants also described an active approach to recruiting successful student teachers. When a student teacher demonstrates the qualities of a strong candidate for the district, the principal begins to visit the classroom more often for the purpose of providing feedback and guidance. Subsequently, a professional relationship begins and the student teacher may consider applying to the district.

Geographic flexibility. Goff and Bruecker (2017) suggest that novice teachers "typically accept positions within 15 miles of their hometowns or undergraduate universities" (p. 1). The principals in this study confirmed this assertion. Additionally, even if novice teachers accept positions further than 15 miles from their hometown or families, these principals and superintendents indicate that early career teachers often seek to find another job closer to family or closer to the school district in which their child attends when they begin their own families.

Content areas. Principals and superintendents in this study described high school positions related to math, science, music, and career/technical education, as content areas for which it was difficult to recruit and retain instructors. Although they may find someone to fill a position, such efforts rarely succeed in the long term or in remote areas; leaders suggest that this may be because these teachers are merely applying for such jobs for the sake of attaining experience prior to work in a larger district. Several interviewees described career and technical teaching positions as the most

difficult to fill, because potential candidates are poised to earn higher salaries as practitioners and would need to sacrifice income from their trade work during the school year. Typically, the interviewees recruit career and technical educators via personal connections, but this often results in a mere short-term solution, due to such factors as salary, lack of teacher training, and challenges related to student behavior. The disjunction between the academic calendar and the business calendar also creates a conflict for a practitioner who might be trying to teach, while maintaining trade work. The "busy season" for tradespeople is often from April to November. One leader described the challenge to fill career/tech positions this way:

> …It's been a revolving door….and that is our greatest challenge filling that specific position because industry and not in the wintertime so much but industry in the building program in the September, October, November and then the April, May, June is really lucrative and giving that up to be a teacher is a challenge for our builders.

Participants did cite special education as a high-need content area that research verifies as a high-need area in terms of retention (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2012; Prater, 2005). Interviewees reported other high-need areas, including science, mathematics, and music. A candidate may be certified to teach one scientific discipline, but rural districts require science teachers capable of providing instruction across the breadth of scientific disciplines. One participant explained it in the following terms:

> …The requirements to teach science are pretty intense…because not only do they have that major in biology and/or chemistry, but then if you add an additional science course onto their teaching assignments, they will be required to take a Praxis.

Another described the challenge from a slightly different perspective:

> … In our area there were several science positions. And so, to be able to compete with those science positions… we have to offer a salary that's comparable or more of an incentive just because otherwise, we don't stand a chance when it comes to these candidates choosing their location and where they are going to teach.

Salaries/access to goods, transportation, and social experiences. Most of those interviewed noted that lower salaries in the state are a challenge for recruitment. The state average is lower than surrounding states and a new funding formula negatively affected some districts' ability to increase teacher salaries rather than improve it which was the original intent. The perception exists that lower salaries is a factor in the decrease in number of applicants seeking a position in the state. One leader described it this way:

> …Before the new funding formula was put in place, we didn't do too bad. Our teacher pay was in the top ten in the state, we're a small district, it's hard to attract people to our district, so our pay was helpful. When the new funding formula was put into place we actually decreased, our pay went down. We're no longer in the top ten, so it's even harder at this point for us to employ people that want to work because the pay is lower than it has been, lower than other school districts, and we are in kind of an isolated area here.

This is also a challenge in career/tech positions. One principal stated:

> …You take like high line power for example, you can teach the course and you're going to make X amount of money or you can actually practice high line power in a field and make 20, 30, 40,000 [dollars] a year more than that.

Some have tried to change benefits to compensate for the salary differential, such as a change to the leave policy, flexible schedules and compensation for professional development hours but they have not seen the impact of these changes yet.

Remote and distant rural districts also acknowledge that their smaller communities do not have the goods, services, and opportunities for socialization of a larger community. They are unable to offer the stores, restaurants, and entertainment that the larger communities can which they believe affects their ability to attract new college graduates. One superintendent also stated that even though they offer some flexibility in the workday schedule, it is still a challenge to find teachers who regard the job as professional:

> …If you're going to be a successful teacher, especially your first years…it's not an 8:00 to 4:00 job. It is a profession. Teaching people to think of it as a profession instead of an hourly job, that if they're here past a certain time they should be reimbursed, is a struggle.

Affordances. Participants list personal connections and networking opportunities in a smaller educational community and starting the hiring process earlier in the academic year as affordances of recruitment in this state. They also suggested that shifting to one application for all districts in the state has simplified the process for candidates. They have also been able to identify local potential in staff members and adapted the interview process to better find candidates with a "goodness of fit" for the district.

Personal connections. A large state in area can be a small state for personal connections. They attend the same meetings and remain connected throughout the year. One principal, a principal in the building for twelve years, said:

> I have a pretty good relationship with folks from across the state. In our region…we're a pretty tight group. We talk often. If I know that XXX down the road has seven English applicants and the top three are pretty good, and I still need one, he's sharing that information with me. Or if I interview somebody here…they just missed getting the job or we didn't have the position they desired, I share the same thing with him. That's the conversation and the strategy we use often just because we are a pretty tight group.

Several also used word of mouth through their personal connections, especially in hard to staff content areas. Participants indicate that in a small community, there is always "somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody" and they use that network to identify possible candidates.

Early identification of needs. Most districts in the study begin to identify needs as early as January or February so that they can "get the best candidates" from what is perceived as a limited pool of candidates, especially for the difficult-to-place fields of math, science, special education, and career/technical education. One participant explained the early identification strategy this way:

> We offer a bonus for early notification of retirement [January] or transfer out of the district as an incentive so that we know how many positions we will need to fill. The earlier we know what we need the better chance we have to get the better candidates.

The ability to hire at the building level has also improved the chances of accurately predicting needs and ensuring that the candidate will work well with colleagues, students, and families. The early identification allows the district to recruit the December graduates from the universities who are starting to "consider their placement for next year." One district even offers a financial incentive to teachers who alert the district as early as October of their plan to leave the district the following academic year.

Strategies. Principals and superintendents in this study report that successful strategies for recruiting teachers include grow-your-own initiatives; identifying potential candidates with flexibility; and a "goodness of fit" through the interview process.

Grow your own. When a content area presents a particular challenge for hiring candidates, the interviewees indicated that they may seek non-certified persons, and then try to ensure that these individuals get the requisite education for certification. One commented, "Well, there's the rancher's wife who has a two-year degree and loves working in school… really encouraging that person to go on and finish the degree and then have a job in the district." Another described the experience of trying to promote teaching to the classified staff like this:

> You might have an educational assistant that has two years of college. They're giving that person an opportunity for a nine-week paid internship. After the nine weeks are over, they return to their former role, but for some of them, it might be the impetus to go on and finish the four-year degree. That's a great idea.

One district has begun a Teacher Pathway program that offers a high school class, after which a student attains the status of a teacher-intern. This kind of program, however, requires a strong relationship with local universities.

Successful candidate characteristics. Principals and superintendent interviewees also assert that flexibility is a primary characteristic that they seek in candidates. Interviewees suggest that in a smaller school or district, the teacher must be able to serve multiple functions; in the case of special education, the number of low-incidence cases can create a need for teachers to teach K-12. Participants also felt that flexibility in terms of a teacher's ability to provide differentiated instruction was important. This was especially relevant to the principal from a district with a predominantly Native student population, who noted:

> …It is really, really important with teachers to understand that if you have 15 students in your classroom, those are 15 complete individuals. Sometimes you've got 15 preps for one class or know how to do that and how to make sure that all of those kids are successful within their abilities.

Transcripts, Praxis scores, and curriculum-specific experiences (i.e., problem-based learning, personalized learning, technology integration) were less important than the capacity for flexibility, and a willingness to "not think teaching is just eight to four". These characteristics also bear on

the likelihood that a teacher will be able to establish enduring connections to the community--both considered critical to goodness-of-fit. One principal capitalizes on the office-to-interview-to demonstration lesson walk, as an opportunity to gather information related to the candidate's personal characteristics and goodness-of-fit:

> I want to see how they're going to engage with the custodian… how are they going to react when they see a kid…what are they going to notice in the hallway. You know, I think it is more about that than it is about how they answer your question in the conference room.

A superintendent offers:

> I'm looking for personality traits. Can they look the superintendent in the eye? Are they going to be able to have a parent-teacher conference? Are they going to speak intelligently and communicate intelligently?

One interesting finding was that when asked about successful candidate characteristics, several mentioned that they look for a candidate with family ties to the area because they are more likely to stay, so retention is part of the consideration when recruiting.

Retention

Challenges. Principals and superintendents expect some natural attrition due to personal circumstances, yet the need to retain has increased. If a district can retain teachers past five years, they state that teachers usually leave only for personal reasons such as "health", "taking care of a parent that's health is failing", "they have a young family and they've got an opportunity to move back to their hometown to be around grandparents". The results of district exit surveys often do not reveal a systemic reason for leaving which makes strategic efforts more challenging. Newer teachers who have moved away from their family or who are the only content teacher in the district may feel isolated. One principal articulated professional isolation in this way:

> Rural programs I think will always struggle with the retention piece because I feel like and, maybe I'm wrong, it would be easiest to connect to a teacher who is doing what you're doing and in the smaller schools, there are fewer teachers who do what you do. I feel like that's part of the issue.

Table 2. Emergent Themes for Retention

Challenges	Strategies
Need to retain has increased	Informal/formal mentoring
Salary and benefits	Monetary and non-monetary incentives
Candidate proximity to home/family	Hire candidates with local connections, business-like incentives
Science/mathematics/English/career/technical	Personal connections

Salary and benefits. Lower salaries and reduced health benefits contribute to the difficulty in retaining teachers in this state, particularly in some content areas. One superintendent describes the frustrations of working in a profession with both lower salary and lower prestige by sharing:

"…Life isn't about money, but it is about professional status and competitiveness, and so we have to be aware of the very competitive people within professional status and stature".

Proximity to home/family. As with recruitment, districts in this study found that teachers may be content to work in a district that is 10-12 miles from their home during their first few years of teaching. However, when their children enter school, they often transfer to the district in which they live or closer to grandparents for assistance with child care. While this commute is manageable, the teacher prefers to become part of the community in which they live rather than the community in which they work. This decision is difficult to predict, thus attrition for family reasons remains a retention challenge. One principal states:

> We like to look for candidates that are already living within the area, that have kind of found their family ties. With some of the candidates we have already interviewed, it's ideal that they may already have children within the school or family that have children within the school so that we know that it's also part of that retention too….that they're not going to be here for a year or two and then decide to move somewhere else. So I guess the longevity of being able to retain once we recruit.

Content areas and behavior. Several interviewees cited lack of preparation for disruptive student behavior as a reason that teachers leave the profession. They suggest that the early career teachers "don't really know why this student is struggling with whatever issue… it takes a while to figure out an effective, efficient system… to deliver the intervention that each child or group of children need". The issue of disruptive student behavior may cause a teacher to leave not only the district, but also the profession. One principal described it as, "the teachers are tired…and so we have to continue to give them incentives to want to keep going because several end up in a different career field within the first five years because they've just had it". One principal acknowledged that targeted mentoring can make a difference and explained:

> I used to think that those things don't matter [mentorship and retention], if the state wants to tell us to do X, Y, Z it doesn't really matter but now I know that …. over time if we stay on that same topic, those things change.

Lack of preparation for disruptive behavior can also contribute to the loss of career/ technical teachers. Interviewees indicate that turnover is also high for career/technical teachers who leave teaching for the higher pay and prestige in their other careers. Similarly, they noted English can be a difficult content area for retention when the district is in proximity to a college or university. Universities will recruit strong English teachers for the introductory English courses on campus, jobs which also pay more and hold higher prestige.

Affordances. Principals and superintendents did not describe affordances of rural teaching. This omission may be worth further consideration.

Strategies. The participants described retention strategies such as mentoring, incentives, and recruitment of candidates most likely to remain connected to the community.

Informal/formal mentoring. Most participants in the study described a formal state mentoring program which matches one mentor from the state to one new teacher for the first year of teaching.

Principals and superintendents, however, stated a concern with this model as the mentor did not always have local context. The mentors are usually in the same content area which provides an advantage for small districts in which there may be only one of each type of teacher. Some noted that informal district matches emerged and mentoring relationships were forged, such as "you would work well with this new teacher, you are the mentor". Others revealed a lack of commitment to a formal mentorship program. One acknowledged fulfilling a state mandate for mentoring by stating, "I think at this point, we're just having a mentorship program to say honestly to say we have a mentorship program". Only one participant discussed the need for tiered mentoring, which is separate mentoring in three stages, (a) year one, (b) years three to five, and (c) five years and beyond. This participant suggested that tiered mentoring could be stage specific and tied to professional development. A concern regarding this model is the number of experienced teachers available to serve as mentors. Yet, more than one acknowledged a need for mentoring beyond the first year. One principal described the need for extended mentoring by explaining:

> It's kind of, when somebody's going through a hard time and everybody first finds out about it, you got all this support there, you know? If somebody in your family passes away, you got a lot of friends that come and they are there for you that first week…maybe that first month. Then, it kind of falls off. That was happening with our new teachers. They would get to the school, and that first week, two, three, four weeks of school, of get into the routine. School starts happening and you kind of forget they're new. They might be struggling and you're not there for them. Since we've implemented the mentorship program, they don't fall through the cracks any longer. There's places they have to be and conversations they have to have.

This model of mentoring extends to mentoring for community connections as well. One interviewee indicated that their mentors help the new teacher make connections to service organizations, the rec center, or recreational activities. This allows the new teacher who is also new to the area recognize the resources available and opportunities to reduce isolation.

More formal approaches go beyond matching a fourth-grade teacher with a fourth-grade teacher. One describes a shift toward a more sustainable approach in this way:

> A team of mentors that work on being mentors, and some years they might not have an assignment then then another year they are going to have an assignment because of the fit we have. But we're going to quit changing mentors all the time. That's based on feedback from the mentors.

Instructional coaches have also been an effective formal mentoring tool. Instructional coaches guide instruction but do not evaluate teachers. This model allows the coach to be supportive as described by one academic leader:

> I've seen teachers that felt so isolated, really, in some ways, because things were not going well for them in their first year, but they were afraid to talk to anybody about it. Once you can build that relationship and open that door…that we're here really to help you succeed… it makes a difference I think.

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Salary and benefits. When interviewees mentioned salary within the context of recruitment, not one principal or superintendent cited salary to explain why a teacher chose to leave the district. One principal did say that, "we negotiate higher salary and health [benefits] to retain teachers, and every year if they get a raise and are interested to go up, that helps to retain". They communicated their belief that teachers may work in a remote or distant town for a few years to gain experience so that they can move to a "bigger city" with more options for affordable housing and social interactions; but they do not suggest that a significant increase in salary follows. A principal shared, "sometimes that candidate will take whatever they can get initially, and then move on quickly". Principals and superintendents cited additional benefits as incentives for retention as well, such as professional development and leave policy. One principal has a policy for paying teachers their hourly wage for all professional development outside of classroom hours, "it may not be much, but it is twenty dollars" which can be a tank of gas or lunch money for their children. A superintendent who describes a shift to a more business-like approach to incentives describes it this way:

> I need to make sure and give them tools to make them feel like a professional, and perhaps an executive, so that if that's how I expect them to act, then I need to make sure, within a budget reason, that we're treating them that way and providing those supports and resources. But how do you do that without having the appearance of wasting money? What are quality gifts that sometimes business people receive that make them feel valued?

Discussion

Challenges

Recruitment versus applications. When prompted about recruitment strategies, using the word "recruit", "recruitment", or "recruiting", interviewees tended to think more in terms of applications than about the absence or presence of intentional recruitment strategies. One leader recognized this during the interview, "I haven't changed how we recruited and so is your question have we had a change in the people that apply for the position, is that your question… or a change in the people I recruit… 'cause who is doing the work here"? Participants described the state website and university job fairs as prime opportunities to look for candidates, but such situations are significant in the sense that any candidates are in search of positions and have already applied for a position in the state; seeking out candidates in such locales fails to qualify as a strategic approach used by a given district to find prospective teachers.

Limited pool of candidates. One challenge that is revealed in this data is the fact that each district maintains its own retention data and designs its own mentoring or induction program. Local data collection may contribute to the lack of awareness that this is a statewide issue. While leaders described taking habitual care not to "poach" candidates, recent academic calendars show the increasingly observable trend among school districts to begin the process of making decisions related to next year's prospective hires earlier and earlier in each school year. This suggests that those who seek candidates earlier in the year have more success at recruiting or manage to recruit better candidates. There appears to be an overarching sense of urgency related to hiring teachers earlier, as well as the perception that all districts in similar areas are in competition for a limited

pool of prospective teachers; however, district leaders have yet to shift away from relying on a single set of identical tools to seek applicants. This is more applicable to the distant and remote rural districts.

Although the state continues to assign each new teacher a state-level mentor, this practice does not appear to be engendering the strong connections to district and community that, according to the principals and superintendents interviewed in this study, are so critical to retention past five years.

Perception of goodness of fit. Many of the participants described goodness of fit as someone who works well with the population of students and teachers, and who "fits" in the community. Though this speaks to retention long term, it may be that the generation of new teachers views community connections differently. Districts may need to reconsider what aspects of community connections early career teachers need to establish roots and ties.

What principals in this study emphasized is finding and retaining teachers who are "invested in the lives of these kids… the demographics that we have, we have high needs students who need to have those relationships with somebody". This characteristic is not geographically unique. Teachers committed to the success of students can be found nationally. Orientation may need to be reciprocal. Communities may also need to learn how to better integrate the new generation of teachers.

Geographic flexibility. Principals and superintendents interviewed for this study reported concerns about retaining new graduates. They suggested that new graduates accepted the first jobs that were offered to them with the intention of seeking a more desirable position in another district within the first three years. They also report that newer teachers who accept positions in remote areas at a distance from family members may initially have geographic flexibility, but the challenges of living in a remote rural area can be too difficult to overcome for a newly certified teacher. Research indicates that certain rural environments can be "geographically, socially, culturally, personally, and professionally isolating" (Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula, 2011, p. 11) and newly graduated teachers can be unprepared for the lack of privacy, socialization with same age peers, isolation from families and understanding the community. New teachers who are also new to the area can feel overwhelmed by the adjustments of relocation and inevitable first year teaching stressors (Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula, 2011). Add to those conditions lower salaries and competition for candidates in high need fields such as science, mathematics, English, and career/technical education and the challenge can seem daunting.

While novice teachers may seek jobs close to family connections and thus appear not to be geographically flexible, there are teaching positions in every state, so when life circumstances change, teaching is a geographically flexible job. Transfers to another district or state, especially with some teaching experience, are easier than in other professions that may be more regionally based, such as pipeline, drilling, agriculture, or manufacturing. This causes some teachers to "follow" a spouse knowing that they will be able to remain in the profession.

Affordances

Network and personal connections. In a less densely populated state, the network of principals and superintendents can be smaller than larger or more densely populated areas. This allows those responsible for hiring teachers to share valuable information about needs and possibilities in an efficient and effective manner. Districts may consider that they could share teachers among districts when necessary, particularly in hard to staff content areas. Innovative technological support shows promise for the development of such partnerships.

High acceptance rate. Given the relatively low number of applicants (often only one) for so many positions, high acceptance rates are an advantage. Districts willing to hire out-of-state candidates could deploy this as a recruiting asset. Those interviewed did not address a high acceptance rate as an affordance, but with some expansion to contiguous states or partnerships with states producing a high number of teacher candidates, this may be an appealing asset.

Recommendations

Studies indicate that factors contributing to successful recruitment and retention in rural areas, such as whether a teacher has a rural background, participation in a mentoring or induction program, positive school climate, higher salary and compensation, housing availability and assistance, and signing bonuses are all variables that could be addressed proactively (Lazarev, Toby, Zacamy, Lin & Newman, 2017).

Develop an intentional plan. Participants in this study indicate that though they do not view recruitment as an immediate need, informal projections suggest that there will be a need to address a shortage caused by retirements within five years. A five-year plan is not considered a long-term plan, so a deliberate, comprehensive and written plan for recruitment and retention would better prepare districts for the potential need. Even though some interviewees hesitate to hire out of state candidates, districts could consider candidates from out of state and start to establish a pipeline of candidates by building relationships with universities in states with an oversupply of teachers. Additionally, districts could target those in other states who are certified to teach but are working in other occupations due to unsuccessful attempts to obtain a teaching position in their home state (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017).

This state has just transitioned to a state application system which makes the application process easier. However, some interviewees observed that a lot of applicants appear to cast a wide net and are not necessarily interested in creating a home in their district. This may or may not be true, it is difficult to determine without more data. While data is collected at the district level, analyzing recruitment and retention data at a statewide level may increase awareness of the shared problem and allow for more collaborative solutions. While one can understand that principals and superintendents may be more likely to hire graduates from the state because they are more likely to remain in the district, the lack of diverse candidates may not be in the best interest of students.

Promote affordances of rural living. Reflection upon the advantages of working, living, and building a life in a rural community would strengthen leaders' efforts to recruit new teachers to the area. A deeper consideration of the affordances of rural living could lead to a stronger

marketing strategy and intentional recruitment/retention plan. A clear focus on the appeal of the area may also support efforts to secure funding for affordable housing or loan repayment. Lazarev, Toby, Zacamy, Lin, & Newman (2017) found in their review of literature that teachers who enjoy a rural lifestyle or who have a rural background are more likely to accept a position or remain in a position in a rural district. Rural living in small towns is conducive to a slower pace, less congestion and traffic, affordable housing and entertainment, a sense of belonging when welcomed warmly, easy connections to the community, and a new cultural experience. Though interviewees did not mention this as a potential attraction, further consideration is warranted.

Monk (2007) also asserts that rural teachers "report more satisfaction with their work environments and feel they have greater autonomy and more direct influence over school policy. Evidence also suggests fewer problems with discipline in rural areas" (p. 160). A more targeted approach to seeking candidates who fit this profile, regardless of their state of origin, could yield more positive results. Perhaps a broader state discussion, such as that conducted in Colorado or Alaska (Adams & Woods, 2015), would lead to a strengths-based perspective and more meaningful and structured statewide effort to recruit and retain teachers.

Retention reconsidered. While further research is needed, it may be that the next generation simply does not intend to remain in the same district for an entire career. While principals and superintendents in this study reported that long term retention was kept in mind when recruiting, this may not match the intent of the current generation of teacher applicants. Districts may need to reduce retention thresholds to three years (from five) and redesign recruitment strategies that fit the millennial mindset. This could work well for a remote rural area who could offer new teachers a cultural experience with housing assistance in exchange for a commitment to three to five years of service. If districts worked closely with the universities, cohorts of teachers could be recruited for a shorter term. Additionally, many millennials state that quality of life is more important than salary.

Mentoring framework. Though mentoring should be contextualized to support the unique needs of each district, and some suggest the needs of each teacher (Sawchuk, 2018), districts in this state might consider a framework for a tiered mentoring system. A tiered mentoring system, such as that described by one superintendent in this study, would differentiate mentoring for the stage and needs of each teacher. This would allow teachers at all stages to benefit from peer and district support.

One superintendent in a newer district stated that they are just at the point of being established enough to have enough older career teachers who can serve as mentors. Since the state is largely rural, districts might also consider using technology to mentor teachers in fields in which there may only be one in a district, i.e. career/technical education, family and consumer science education, music, or honors/advanced placement (Adams & Woods, 2015; Dee & Goldhaber, 2017). The content of mentoring should also be closely aligned with reasons that teachers stay or leave the district. Behavioral issues of students was often cited as a reason that teachers leave the profession. Mentoring to strengthen teacher capacity for working effectively with students who have behavioral issues may keep teachers in the profession.

Flexible academic calendar. One high need area in the state is that of career/technical educators. Districts might consider class scheduling flexibility which would allow a person who is actively working in a trade or seasonal field to teach a November to April class rather than the traditional fall or spring semester. The state is largely agricultural, so this may also suit non-traditional teacher pathways. Several participants noted that personal connections led them to recruit the "farmer's wife" for teaching positions. Perhaps the traditional August to May calendar could be adapted for certain hard-to-staff content areas.

School-university partnerships. If novice teachers select districts near their families or places of undergraduate studies, a strong university connection could yield cohorts of student teachers who complete their student teaching in the same remote or distant rural district creating their own community and sense of family. Initiatives such as yearlong residency programs for student teaching provides the district with an opportunity to initiate that strong connection to the school and community (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017) and begin the induction process earlier. As some principals suggested in this study, this "family" could then offer support if hired as a team and housing assistance could be part of the incentive. Relationships with universities could also address the loss of English teachers to college teaching. A change in schedule to offer introductory classes late in the day allows English teachers to teach at both institutions. Additional incentives of loan repayment, affordable housing and transportation to a nearby town or urban center for events could reduce the sense of isolation and financial concerns. Finally, districts should consider non-traditional candidates in their own communities and work with universities to develop more online options for teacher certification (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017). This grow-your-own approach would capitalize on people who have already made the decision to remain in the community and may have considered attendance at a university prohibitive.

Financial incentives. Paid internships for either aspiring teachers in high school, university students who are not majoring in education, those with two-year degrees in a related field, or staff encourage non-traditional pathways to teaching. The paid internship could provide benefits for PK-12 students such as small group support, mentoring, and personal connections to another caring adult. An internship could also provide benefits for teachers such as small group support, lesson preparation, data analysis, supervision during personalized learning, technology support, or application of real world experience. Other incentives may include salary increases, housing stipends, signing bonuses, retention bonuses, scholarship programs and location-specific incentives (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley, 2008; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015)

Recruitment and retention of teachers in remote and distant rural areas in this Midwest state remains a challenge. Given the statistical trends, principals and superintendents will need to be more intentional about recruitment and retention strategies and consider collaboration with the state, the business community and the higher education community to ensure a quality, equitable education for every student.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based upon the results of the study and my review of the literature, several recommendations for further study are noteworthy. Districts appear to keep their own data on retention, and do not

appear to consult the data regularly. The principals and superintendents did not furnish a report of specific retention rates in response to queries about retention; this could just as easily reflect a lack of readily available data as a hesitancy to reveal such data. Further research and data collection concerning state retention may reveal patterns and provide insights that bolster appeals for the financial support needed to establish a more formalized, contextualized mentoring system.

Research concerning perceptions of those teachers who have remained in a given district for five or more years (i.e., have been retained) may yield a more comprehensive picture of the primary factors that contribute to a teacher's decision to remain in the district, along with the comparative utility of various retention. To that end, it would be valuable to assemble information about mentoring initiatives, formal and informal, that contribute to or support decisions to remain in the district. Additionally, research concerning the perceptions of teachers within the one- to five-year window could furnish data about the most effective strategies or critical factors involved in decisions to remain or leave the district. However, while the literature identifies salary as a critical factor, principals and superintendents interviewed in this study regard salary as a decisive factor for recruitment but not for retention. Such research hint at the unexpected strength of the impact of family and community connections on decisions to remain in a district. There is a void or gap that complicates efforts to interpret the information about mentoring gathered from the targeted population; it is therefore possible that the reality of incentives and mentoring programs may fail to embody the effective support identified by millennials or late-career teachers.

Studying the impact of certain university-school partnership initiatives on recruitment and retention in distant and remote rural areas may inform the design and employment of teacher preparation programs in rural states and regions. More exhaustive data on retention rates of teachers who proceeded along the grow-your-own pathway or who participated in a year-long student teaching residency would yield information that informs and guides principals, superintendents, human resource personnel and teacher preparation providers.

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Appendix A

Exhibit A: NCES's urban-centric locale categories, released in 2006

Locale	Definition
City	
Large	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000
Suburb	
Large	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000
Town	
Fringe	Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area
Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area
Remote	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area
Rural	
Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster
Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

SOURCE: Office of Management and Budget (2000). Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas; Notice. Federal Register (65) No. 249. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp