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The Unique Challenges and Best Practices for Rural School Principals: Attracting and Retaining Skilled Teachers in Small Communities

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The Unique Challenges and Best Practices for Rural School Principals

Rural school principals have unique challenges and responsibilities, distinguishing them from their urban and suburban counterparts. Among these responsibilities is the critical task of attracting and retaining skilled teachers, which can be complicated by limited resources and staff, as highlighted by the National Association of State Boards of Education (2016). However, rural principals often have to juggle multiple roles, such as district leadership, principalship, and even bus driving, limiting their ability to focus on teacher recruitment and retention. Moreover, smaller class sizes in rural schools may require principals to manage instructional resources and support teachers responsible for teaching multiple grade levels and subjects in the same classroom. As rural schools are often the hub of their communities, principals must engage with families, local organizations, and businesses to establish partnerships and garner support for the school.

To meet their communities' unique needs and challenges, rural principals must be adaptable, versatile, effective communicators, problem-solvers, and leaders. Rural principals must be culturally sensitive and aware of their communities' unique cultural norms and values to engage effectively with students, families, and staff. In addition to monitoring student achievement outcomes, they must prioritize student growth and performance when hiring individuals responsible for direct instruction. Effective educators significantly impact student learning and development, as Tucker and Stronge (2005) highlighted. Therefore, principals must establish well-defined policies and procedures to ensure sufficient campus staffing and retain high-quality schoolteachers, as Nguyen et al. (2020) noted. Rural principals can implement several practices to achieve this, such as providing ongoing professional development opportunities, offering competitive salaries and benefits, creating a positive school culture, and fostering strong relationships between teachers and administrators.

Statement of the Problem

Compared to urban or suburban schools, rural school principals may be disadvantaged when hiring and retaining quality teachers because of their remote locations, low salaries, or additional workloads, such as three or more teaching preps (Monk, 2007). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) suggest that slowing the ever-increasing national attrition rate of teachers leaving the profession could help address the current teacher shortage crisis. Furthermore, teacher turnover rates may intensify in rural locations and schools with large percentages of economically disadvantaged students or students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019). New teachers commonly leave the field of education altogether or move from school to school in search of a nurturing environment that supports their developing teaching skills (Rosenburg & Hawley-Miles, 2018). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond state, "Among the key variables that drive turnover is the kind of preparation teachers have had prior to entry, and the kind of administrative support they receive on the job" (p. vi). This study investigated high-leverage practices used for recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers in small, rural schools.

For this research study placed in the top of Texas, United States, rural schools are defined according to their less dense geographic location and a student enrollment of fewer than 300 students (Ratcliffe et al., 2016; NCES, n.d.). As a result of changing settlement patterns, the definition of what constitutes urban and rural must continually be modified (Ratcliffe et al., 2016, p. 1). The number of schools classified as "rural" continues to increase nationwide.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), rural areas are classified into three categories: fringe, distant, and remote.

- Fringe - less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area
- Distant - more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area
- Remote - more than 25 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2022).

According to a recent Center for Public Education (2023) study, almost one out of every five students attends rural schools (p.3). Some studies report that up to 28% of U.S. schools can be considered "rural" (NCES, n.d.; NCES, 2019). While the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which oversees public education in Texas, United States, follows the NCES categoric definitions for rural schools, they also delineate the differences between rural 1A and 2A schools by using these descriptors: Other, Central City Suburban, Major Suburban, Non-metropolitan Fast Growing, Non-metropolitan Stable, Charter Schools, Independent Town, and Other that is close to major towns or city (TEA, 2021). Currently, 36% of schools in Texas are classified as 1A or 2A school districts (TEA, 2021). Due to this sizable percentage of small rural schools, there is a dire need to identify effective practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining quality teachers to work in these rural areas (Monk, 2007).

Purpose

As the shortage of teachers grows across the state and nation, there is an urgency to find systemic solutions for rural school leaders who hire teachers (NCES, 2014). This research study was designed to explore innovative practices for rural school leaders as they seek to maintain an adequate supply of teachers to improve overall student achievement in rural settings. The purpose of the investigation is to identify effective hiring practices and teacher retention strategies utilized in 1A and 2A schools in Texas.

Literature Review

A review of relevant literature revealed that principals of small, rural schools need more effective practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining quality teachers to work in the unique environment (Monk, 2007). In a spotlight article on rural education, Brenner, Azano, and Downey (2021) provide administrators with ideas to support new teachers by helping them to make connections within the rural community. The authors also suggest that the principal encourages using place-based curricula and pedagogies in the classrooms. Brenner, Azano, and Downey (2021) write, "A pedagogy of place leverages students' local knowledge and experiences as they consider how the content of the curriculum relates to the communities in which they live" (p. 16). Their final recommendation was to help new teachers become rooted in the rural community by supporting and assisting them as they build relationships and get involved.

The 2022 Texas Teacher Workforce Report (Templeton, et al., 2022) opens with the mission statement of the Texas public education system, which is to "prepare every child for success in college, a career, or the military" (TEA, 2022). This lofty goal can only be realized by identifying and using effective strategies for recruiting, supporting, and retaining high-quality teachers who deliver effective instruction in their classrooms (TEA, 2022; Templeton, et al., 2022). The report prepared by Templeton, et al. (2022) provides several policy recommendations to strengthen the teacher workforce in Texas. One of these suggestions was a call to increase exploration about the role of the workplace environment on teacher retention. The current

research study is one step in identifying promising leadership practices for recruitment, hiring and retention of high-quality teachers.

Leading rural schools presents several unique challenges. The Center for Public Education (2023) explains five areas that may contribute to an unequal learning opportunity in rural schools. These areas include: 1) inadequate funding caused by the declining rural economy, 2) a digital divide due to less access to technology or digital learning resources, 3) limited access to high-quality early education programs, 4) shortages in providing teachers and/or specialized educational professionals, and 5) limited research on policy and praxis issues affecting rural schools. (p. 5). Findings from this research study strive to address the inequity of shortages of teaching professionals in rural schools.

Theoretical Framework

Place-conscious Education

Due to the focus on the unique needs of small rural schools for this research study, the inquiry was grounded in a place-based or place-conscious educational theory. This theory upholds the idea that educational practices should be tailored to the needs and values of children and adults inherent to the places where they live, work, and attend school (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

According to Gruenewald and Smith (2008), place-based education is a way to "address the issues of equity and excellence that dominate discourse about American schooling" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, Afterword, para. 1). This multidisciplinary concept combines five "dimensions of place" that may shape the development of a socio-ecological, place-conscious education: (a) the perceptual, (b) the sociological, (c) the ideological, (d) the political, and (e) the ecological" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 619). In small rural schools, the community and school district are knit together within a symbiotic relationship; therefore, any school reform initiative must fit within the geo-political society of that specific place. School leaders and reformers must understand the community's nuances to design effective practices that work in their locale.

Leadership Theories

The development of effective leadership practices is essential for the rural school community. The principal's approach plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of their leadership practices. An understanding of different leadership theories can help identify the best approach to use. Transformational, transactional, and ambidextrous leadership theories provide different lenses to approach a problem, or these theories may be combined to create an administrator's unique style. Transformational leadership involves inspiring and motivating followers to achieve their full potential. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, focuses on creating clear expectations and consequences for performance. Ambidextrous leadership combines these two approaches and involves balancing transformational and transactional leadership styles to adapt to the needs of different situations. School leaders who adopt an effective leadership style create a positive school culture that attracts and retains talented teachers by providing professional growth and development opportunities. These leaders establish clear expectations and provide support to help teachers perform at their best. Effective school leadership practices combine transformational, transactional, and ambidextrous leadership styles. This blending of leadership philosophies creates a supportive environment for teachers that will impact the quality of education for students.

Transformational leadership theory

Educational leaders have several solutions for retaining quality teachers, and one of the most popular approaches in recent years is the transformational leadership theory. This model emphasizes the leader's ability to influence team members and communicate a shared vision for achieving goals. Shared leadership, a component of transformational leadership, involves collaborating and sharing responsibility with team members. This approach also values intellectual stimulation and an effective team learning structure. Overall, transformational leadership theory is characterized by a charismatic and inspirational approach (McLaurin & Al Amri, 2008), with leaders using charm and persuasiveness to motivate people toward positive change. Such leaders include Dr. Martin Luther King and Pope John Paul II, who used powerful oratory and engaging doctrine, respectively.

Haidt (2013) explains that transformational leadership utilizes shared responsibility to activate pride, loyalty, and enthusiasm among employees, resulting in less monitoring. Wahlstrom et al. (2010) found that principals' trust in superiors' ability to carry out transformational leadership functions can positively impact teacher influence on student performance. Transformational leadership can improve quality instruction and teacher instructional improvement, helping combat teacher retention issues (Ingersoll, 2011). Heck and Hallinger (2010) suggest collaborative leadership involving strategic school-wide actions for improvement. With its charismatic approach, transformational leadership can improve self-efficacy and build trusted relationships to impact retention positively (Califf & Brooks, 2020).

Transactional leadership theory

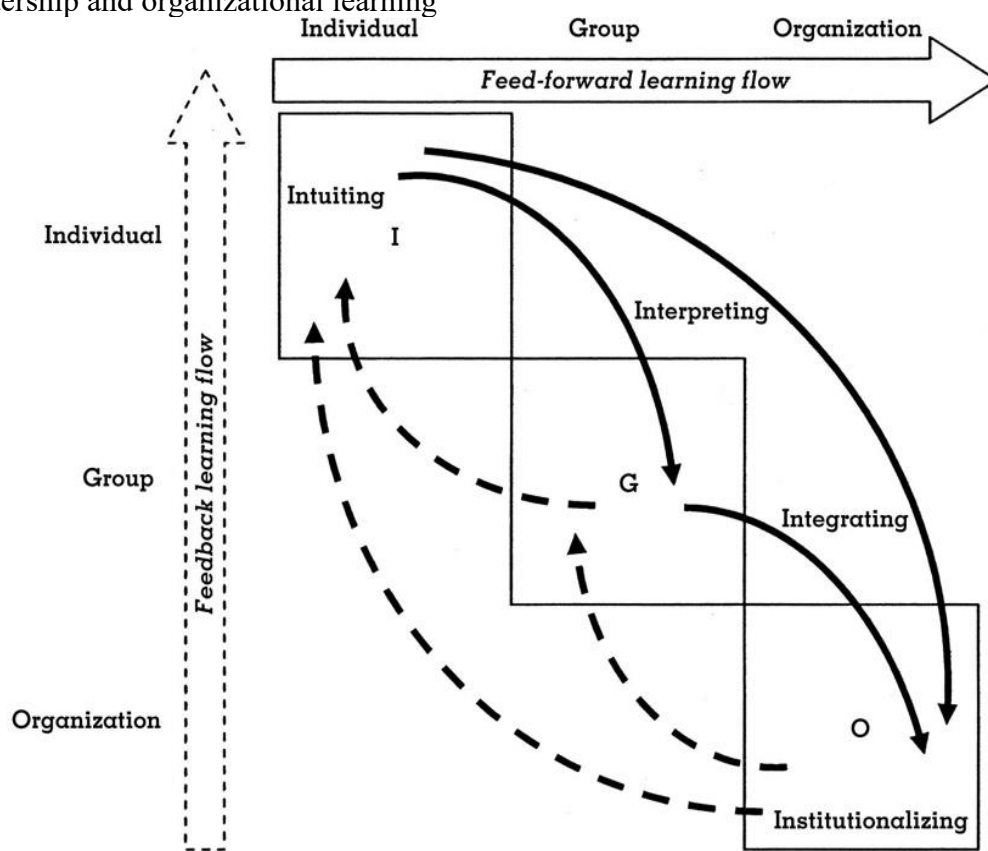
According to Vera and Crossan (2004), transactional leadership motivates individuals through contingent-reward exchanges and active management-by-exception. Transactional leaders are highly organized and use goal-setting to articulate agreements for rewarding leaders for achieving specific goals. Bass (2000) found that using tools from other leadership theories, such as transactional leadership, can provide a base for higher levels of transformational leadership to positively impact motivation and performance. However, educational leaders need to review reward systems and the findings of Wahlstrom et al. (2010), which emphasize the importance of managerial and instructional support in teacher efficacy. Principals cannot ignore data that impacts student achievement and must create conditions where teachers do not feel isolated in their decision-making. Utilizing more tools for retaining teachers positively impacts the design of transactional leadership theory.

Ambidextrous leadership theory

Positively balancing transactional leadership and transformational leadership theories requires a learning process that combines both theories together to benefit principals in their decision-making. A newly proposed model is called ambidextrous leadership, where transactional and transformational ideas are shared. Vera and Crossan (2004) suggest that in particular times leaders need transactional leadership, and at other times can benefit from transformational leadership (p. 226). The foundational characteristic of ambidextrous leadership requires the balance of transactional and transformational leadership, such as giving a teacher a task by following through and learning from it. From the extensive reviews of the literature and according to Vera and Crossan (2004), ambidextrous leadership theory is organized into a framework that is illustrated below (p. 532):

Figure 1

Strategic leadership and organizational learning



Note. Illustration of ambidextrous leadership theory organizational framework. Reprint from “Strategic leadership and organizational learning,” by Vera, D., and Crossan, M. (2004), *Academy of Management Review* 29(2), p. 532. Copyright 2004 by the Academy of Management Review.

- I Individual learning stock:** Individual competence, capability, and motivation to undertake the required tasks
- G Group learning stock:** Group dynamics and the development of shared Understanding
- **Organizational learning stock:** Alignment between the nonhuman storehouses of learning, including systems, structures, strategy, procedures, and culture, given the competitive environment
- **Feed-forward learning flow:** Whether and how individual learning feeds forward into group learning and learning at the organizational level (e.g., changes to the structure, systems, products, strategy, procedures, and culture)
- - - **Feedback learning flow:** Whether and how individual learning that is embedded in the organization (e.g., systems, structure, strategy) affects individual and group learning

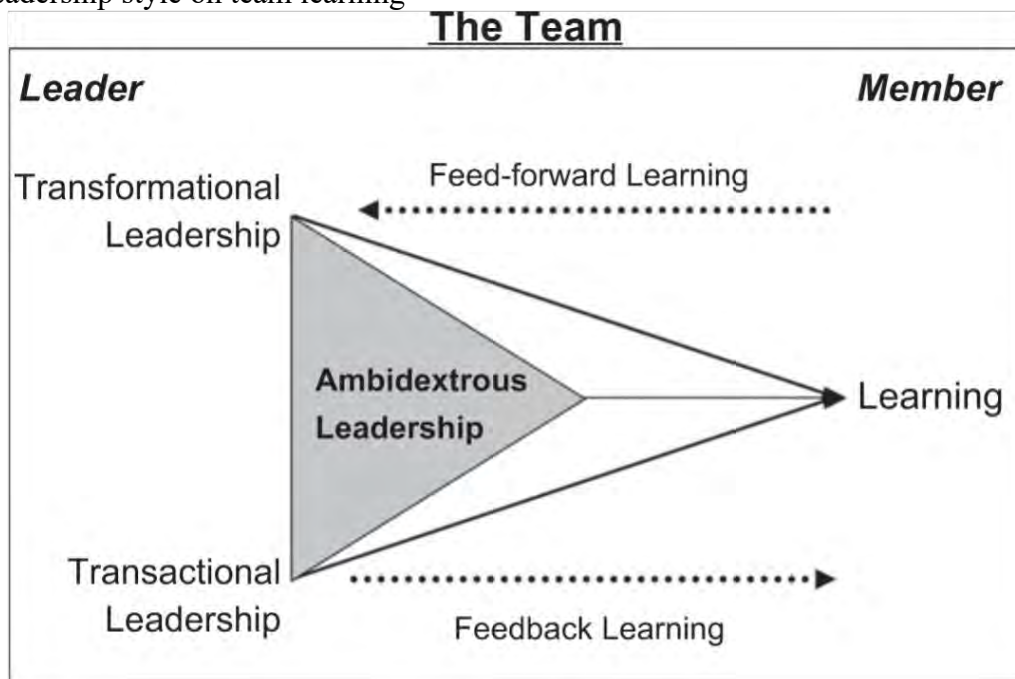
Collaboration is essential to leadership, enabling leaders to work effectively with multiple stakeholders. Two leadership theories, ambidextrous leadership, and transformational learning can benefit team leaders. In this model of ambidextrous leadership shown in Figure 1, transformational leadership is defined as having feed-forward learning that reinforces team

learning. In transactional leadership, feedback learning occurs. When faced with a challenge like a student not following the rules, a leader who uses ambidextrous leadership can draw on feedback learning and the student's history to decide. However, this approach may only sometimes be the best option, as it can lead to hasty decisions without a complete understanding of the situation.

In contrast, the transformational learning theory focuses on feed-forward learning, emphasizing collaboration and open communication between the leader and the student. By engaging in feed-forward learning, the leader can work with the student to create a mutually beneficial solution based on a deeper understanding of the student's needs and motivations. This approach is fundamental when recruiting for rural schools, where there may be a high turnover of teachers. As Ingersoll (2011) notes, there are many reasons why teachers may leave teaching, but one common factor is feeling unsupported or disconnected from their colleagues and leadership. Using transformational and feed-forward learning principles, team leaders can create a more supportive and collaborative work environment that encourages teachers to stay and thrive in their roles.

The illustration and figure 2 of Bucic, Robinson, and Ramburuth (2004) give a better understanding of a team in an ambidextrous leadership theory organization (p. 233).

Figure 2
Effects of leadership style on team learning



Note. Leadership and learning in teams from a combined transformational and transactional leadership into one, ambidextrous leadership. Reprint from “Effects of leadership style on team learning,” by Bucic, T., Robinson, L., and Ramburuth, P. (2004), *Journal of Workplace Learning* 22(4), p. 233. Copyright 2004 by Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Due to changing variables, principals must be open-minded in using the ambidextrous approach to find the right balance to build positive relationships with students and teachers. By taking the ambidextrous approach, administrators can balance the charismatic approach of

transformational leadership to recruit a teacher by “charming” them with the positives of teaching in a rural school setting and use the transactional leadership approach to bolster teachers’ self-efficacy to encourage them to stay in the rural school. By presenting both theories within the framework of ambidextrous practice, the principal fosters a positive atmosphere to help rural school leaders attract and retain teachers.

Methodology

With the increasing shortage of teachers across the state and nation, it is crucial to find systemic solutions that rural school leaders can use to attract and retain teachers. The NCES offers a valuable resource for analyzing and comparing data on education, poverty, and other social indicators within rural areas using their category nomenclature (NCES, 2022). This mixed-method case study was designed to investigate and identify some of the systematic processes and procedures rural school districts can use to combat teacher shortages. The study aims to uncover effective hiring techniques and teacher retention methods used in 1A and 2A schools in the Texas Panhandle served by Education Service Centers 16 and 17. The overarching goal of sharing the findings of this research is to help rural school administrators ensure a sufficient supply of teachers to enhance student success in rural areas. The research study was designed using the following questions to guide the identification of effective, promising practices:

1. What are effective ways for principals to use high-leverage practices to successfully attract, recruit, and retain teachers in small, rural public schools located in the Texas Panhandle?
2. How can principals replicate positive practice processes for teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention in other rural schools?

Research Design

This research study used a two-phase research design to identify positive practices for teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention (Creswell et al., 2003). The first phase involved creating and disseminating an online survey questionnaire through Qualtrics, a commonly used research tool. The second data collection phase utilized semi-structured interview questions to capture additional details about the participants' unique practices.

To investigate the potential thematic correlations between the administrative perception of teacher retention, a descriptive data-gathering technique was utilized via a questionnaire survey. The survey instrument was carefully designed to elicit information related to administrators' perceptions regarding teacher retention within their respective districts and the effects on their community. The survey questions were developed based on a review of the relevant literature on leadership styles for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. Experts in the field reviewed the questions for clarity and relevance. The survey comprised 13 questions that gathered district information from the participants and data on practices they use to retain high-quality teachers. Additionally, two open-ended questions were included to gather information on the challenges and obstacles schools face in recruiting, hiring, and retaining quality teachers.

Settings and Participants

The study targeted the population of administrators from school districts located in both the Region 16 and 17 Educational Service Centers (ESCs) areas of the Texas Panhandle. To recruit participants, researchers initially emailed the survey link to administrators of 1A and 2A

school districts in the targeted area to invite them to complete the survey. The researchers invited administrators from the 64 1A and 2A school districts located in the Region 16 and Region 17 ESCs in the Panhandle to participate in the survey. The recruitment email was sent to district administrators, which included superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and directors. From the initial invitation emails and follow-up contacts, 66 administrators completed the survey. All the completed surveys provided usable data for most survey items.

Data Collection and Analysis

To assist administrators in finding innovative solutions for recruiting, hiring, and retaining quality teachers, a questionnaire survey was conducted to gather information about the "attributes, attitudes, or actions of a population" (Preston, 2009, p. 46). The study aimed to collect data about the methods used by rural schools in the Texas Panhandle to retain high-quality teachers. The survey was voluntary, but participants could consent to a follow-up Zoom interview and provide their contact information for scheduling. Descriptive statistics and factor analysis were used to evaluate the collected data and discover different leadership practices in teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention. Qualitative and quantitative analysis were both employed to identify positive strategies for recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers.

Data collected consisted of participants' responses to a combination of open- and closed-ended narrative questions. These responses were then analyzed using frequency statistics and summarized and organized in Table 1 (below). In addition, the researchers examined the participant's responses to the follow-up interview questions using thematic analysis completed by human coders (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Saldaña, 2021). This qualitative analysis began by initially using axial coding. Researchers employed the In Vivo coding process, which maintains the actual language of the participants (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss, 1987). The data underwent an iterative analysis process, which involved using a secondary coding method that included intercoder agreement and reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Bruce (2007), Harper (2003), and Mauthner, N. S. & Doucet, A. (2003).

Findings

The study collected data during the Fall of 2022 from 66 administrators – 43 superintendents, 20 principals, and three directors from 1A and 2A school districts of the Panhandle of Texas. Table 1 displays a comprehensive list of responses from the 66 questionnaire participants. For example, 41 respondents indicated the salary range for new teachers in their districts was between \$33,660 to \$36,999, 58 administrators responded that they provide stipends as an incentive, and 60 administrators needed to hire for Early Childhood (EC) through 6 grades in the last three years.

Table 1

Number of 1A and 2A school districts of the Panhandle of Texas

Participating Characteristics of district	N=64	Frequency	Percentages
Salary for new teachers		41	0.67
\$33,660 - \$36,999		13	0.20
\$37,000 - \$39,999		5	0.08
\$40,000-\$42,999			
Above \$46,000		1	0.02
Additional incentives			

Housing	13	0.20
Stipends	58	0.88
Bonuses	18	0.27
Benefits (rent, tuition, transportation)	11	0.17
Other	9	0.14
Grade level positions		
EC-6	60	0.91
4-8	59	0.89
7-12	62	0.94
Content areas hired		
ELAR	55	0.83
Math	50	0.76
Sciences	51	0.77
Social Studies	42	0.64
Special Education	44	0.67
Physical Education	30	0.45
Agriculture	63	0.95
Languages Other Than English	11	0.17
Music	25	0.38
Theatre	14	0.21
Art	5	0.08
CTE	25	0.38
Librarian	2	0.03
Counselor	3	0.05
Most Significant Retention Issues		
Salary	43	0.65
Lack of Training	6	0.09
Student Issues	7	0.11
Personal Family issues		
Community Issues	9	0.14
Other	22	0.33
Open faculty positions filled		
Post the job opening	54	0.82
Moved personnel within district	47	0.71
Hired long-term substitute	15	0.23
Hired an emergency certificate	32	0.48
Hired a probationary certificate	32	0.48
Hired a non-certificate	33	0.50
Other	5	0.08
Grow-your-Own		
Local staff going back to receive teaching certificate	53	0.80
Former students coming back to teach at district	42	0.64
Shared Services Used		
SPED Services	66	100

504	5	0.08
Occupational/Physical Therapists	48	0.73
Nurse	7	0.11
Counselor	3	0.05
Transportation	2	0.03
Food Service	10	0.15

Note: Each categoric question is asked within the last three years and is answered.

From the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews, the five administrators who participated in the follow-up interviews discussed various strategies for recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers that have shown success in their small rural districts. For example, building a core group of excellent teachers has helped to attract other high-quality teachers. Participant Two explained: *"We have found that good people attract good people."* The importance of professional connections to other educators was also mentioned in hiring effective educators. Participant Two added, *"What we've done is we've actively reached out to other people that we know that are good through our connections."*

The power of an excellent mentor teacher cannot be overstated either. Participant Five recalled, *"Some of the best teaching I ever got ...came from other mentor teachers... the lady that I did my first year of teaching with took me under her wing... she had taught kindergarten for 20+ years, and she grabbed hold of me and really grew me. And so that's where we're hoping to be able to go next ... pairing [novice teachers] with the right people."* Additionally, Participant Five explained that connections to a university were also meaningful because the school district can easily reach out to university colleagues to answer their questions and find extra support or resources.

Complete online preparation and training courses were critical for working paraprofessionals to complete the required educator preparation coursework without driving long distances. *"They just don't get a degree in education until it's entirely online, which is unfortunate; honestly, because that's what they really need, and that's what they want (Participant Five)."*

Some participants also mentioned developing a collaborative, supportive culture in the district. Participant Four, a superintendent of a small rural school, described actions that helped build the school culture: *"I set up meetings with the teachers in their rooms. I go in, and I ask them a couple of questions and I give them the leeway to ask me anything... [the teachers] want to talk about what's going on.... Let's listen to teachers - Let's talk to teachers!"* Participant One made a connection to this concept from their work with the Future-Ready Superintendents Leadership Network (FRSLN). Participant One shared that at a recent FRSLN conference, the importance of work-life balance for teachers was discussed. Participant One shared that to develop a culture of support in their school district, *"we really try and stretch out this work-life balance more toward the life part."*

Another effective strategy for retention of teachers mentioned by Participant Two was changing to a 4-day school week. Participant Two explained: *"Transitioning to a four-day week has been very positive for retention.... People appreciate the four-day week, it will make them more likely to stay – and it is one more recruitment tool we have"*. Participant One also shared that their school district was exploring moving to a 4-day school week.

Paying additional stipends to teachers was another positive strategy used by the respondents. Participant Two said, *"We invested our extra dollars into teacher stipends... we*

[gave] it directly to our teachers... we added \$5,000 for each teacher, so that gave them another reason to stay and also provided us with one more recruitment/retention tool."

A district Teacher Academy was another strategy mentioned in the interviews. This is when the district helps to train paraprofessionals. The paraprofessional is paid the regular paraprofessional salary and receives a small stipend. The school district then supports the paraprofessional through their college classes and the certification process. Participant Five shared the benefits of the school teacher academy approach by saying paraprofessionals who have worked in the rural school *"know how the school operates... and has been in many classrooms... they are going to be a better teacher than someone that we could hire coming straight out of another field because she's been in our school district."* *She knows our kids. She knows our families. And so, this has provided a way for her to become a certified teacher."*

As stated by DeMatthews et al. (2022), it is widely known that rural districts and schools face unique challenges, including insufficient resources and less experienced teachers compared to suburban schools. Nonetheless, smaller class sizes, increased sense of belonging for students and families, and higher rates of school-family engagement are positive outcomes commonly associated with rural schools (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Croft & Moore, 2019; McShane & Smarick, 2018). Table 2 displays the consistent findings of this study from the five administrators interviewed, outlining both the positive benefits and challenges rural schools face.

Table 2

Positives and Challenges of working in small rural schools

Positives	Challenges
Smaller Classroom Size (Participant Two)	Not much social life (restaurants)
Students' behavior is better – less discipline issues (Participant Two)	Other people "being in your business"
Community connections – more personal	Small budget
Family-oriented culture - Great place to raise a family – children get "special" one-on-one attention from teachers	
Students can participate in different extra-curricular events	
Teachers make a bigger impact on the students in small rural schools (Participant One)	
Ability to make decisions for quickly	
Trusting relationships (Participant Three)	

Note. Positives in this diagram corresponds to the challenges.

Another salient factor discussed by two participants was the issue of teachers in small schools having to prepare for multiple courses. For instance, Participant One stated, *"The average for our secondary teachers is 2 to 3 preps, but we do have some that have more."* Participant Two also explained, *"It might not be appealing [to teach in a small rural school] for certain teachers because you have more preps."*

When participants were asked to "dream big" about what strategies would work in a "perfect world," the idea of providing more support to teachers surfaced multiple times. They explained that teachers are now facing tremendous challenges and feel overwhelmed with the magnitude of their responsibilities. Participant Two answered, *"We would reduce some of their*

[the teachers] stress workload with more of the support personnel that you have in larger places” (i.e., instructional specialists, counselors, school psychologists).

From the iterative qualitative analysis process, three major themes were identified. These themes provide insight into the most effective high-leverage practices used for the recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers in small rural communities:

High-leverage Innovative Practices

Ongoing Support

The analyzed data showed that new teachers need frequent and ongoing high-quality support to be effective in the classroom. Educators are now expected to address many societal issues, such as school safety, suicide prevention, and social-emotional health; however, nothing will be accomplished without support for teachers in the classroom. In order to assist new teachers, it is essential to deliberately design and integrate professional development into the school's daily practices. Some participants mentioned that the Texas Instructional Leadership (TIL) framework (TEA, 2023) is practical but expensive. Participant One shared that instructional support is needed to develop teachers' craft. However, support from the Regional Educational Service Centers can become costly, especially for a small rural school district budget.

School District Teacher Academies may offer a way to develop teaching expertise by providing instructional coaching and by offering support to paraprofessionals who are striving to complete coursework and certification requirements.

Collaborative Efforts

The Panhandle School Leaders Association (PSLA) workshop was used as a collaborative effort by the researchers to invite district leaders to participate in the research study. This quarterly meeting, sponsored by ESC 16, facilitates collaboration among school district leaders and provides an avenue for sharing promising practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers.

The community often collaborates closely with the schools in small rural school districts. When superintendents and principals intentionally set aside time to listen to teachers' ideas and concerns, educators feel supported, and the sharing of ideas generated by other educators can be especially powerful. Personal connections and family-oriented culture are often touted as one of the positive aspects of living and working in a small rural community.

A positive and productive relationship between the principal and the school board is critical for effective governance and decision-making in the school district (Williams et al., 2019). The principal should be transparent with the school board, sharing updates on the school's performance and the challenges the staff and students face. In contrast, the school board should communicate their expectations and priorities for the school district. Both parties must work together, respect each other's perspectives and priorities, and create policies that will benefit the school district and ensure its success. By fostering an environment of trust, collaboration, and accountability, this relationship can lead to better outcomes for students and the entire community (Zagata, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the significance of building strong relationships between principals and school boards in small rural schools.

Work/Life Balance & Job Satisfaction

According to the administrators who participated in the study, supporting a work-life balance for teachers was essential in achieving positive progress within their districts. Participant Three described how the small rural town passed a bond issue to provide faculty housing. With

the money raised from the bond, the school district could purchase houses to provide rent-free or reduced rental rates to teachers and other school employees. Providing affordable housing for teachers is more than just a recruiting tool for rural schools. Other larger school districts across the state are exploring this option. For example, Frost (2022) reported that Pflugerville ISD proposed passing school bonds that would be used for teacher housing. The ability to provide affordable housing helps the educator make connections to the community and avoid long commutes. Not worrying about finding and paying for housing can positively impact teachers' job satisfaction.

Discussion

Effective recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies are vital to ensure a diverse and qualified teaching workforce that can provide quality education to students. Rural schools face unique challenges, such as declining enrollment, limited resources, and teacher shortages, making it difficult for administrators to effectively balance stakeholders' expectations and demands. The educational system faces several significant challenges, including insufficient budgets and salaries, lack of support for teachers, and limited resources, particularly for special education. The study conducted has revealed that there are multiple challenges that the educational system is currently facing. One of the major concerns is the need for more budget and salaries. This limitation has created difficulties in allocating adequate funds for crucial educational resources. In order to tackle these obstacles, it is essential to establish effective practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers that prioritize creating a favorable work environment, facilitating professional development, and encouraging job fulfillment (Preston et al., 2013; DeMatthews et al., 2022).

Positive practice processes for teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention involve two phases: attracting and recruiting teachers and supporting and retaining teachers. Each phase involves a series of specific actions and strategies that focus on building a positive work environment, supporting professional growth, and promoting job satisfaction.

Phase 1: Recruiting Teachers

The first phase of the teacher recruitment and retention process involves attracting and recruiting teachers to apply for open positions within a school or district. This phase focuses on building awareness and interest in the organization, highlighting its strengths, and establishing a clear and appealing brand. The following are key components of the first phase:

- **Marketing and branding:** Developing and promoting a positive image of the organization to potential job candidates.
- **Outreach and networking:** Engaging with local and regional universities, teacher education programs, and career fairs to recruit new candidates.
- **Support for applicants:** Providing resources and guidance to applicants, including a streamlined application process, clear communication, and timely feedback.
- **Candidate selection:** Ensuring that selection procedures are fair, equitable, and effective at identifying the best candidates for the job.

Recruitment involves identifying and attracting potential candidates for teaching positions. This can be done through various methods, such as advertising job openings in relevant publications, attending job fairs, and utilizing social media and other online platforms. Effective recruitment strategies must also target diverse candidates to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in the teaching profession. Outreach efforts can be made to minority-

serving institutions such as historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic Serving Institutes (HSIs), and community organizations that serve diverse populations.

Hiring involves selecting and appointing the most suitable candidates for teaching positions. Effective hiring practices include creating a rigorous and fair selection process that involves multiple stakeholders, such as principals, teachers, and parents. This can ensure that the best candidates are selected based on their qualifications, experience, and potential to meet the needs of students. The selection process should also consider the importance of diversity in the teaching profession, and efforts should be made to reduce biases and promote equity and inclusion.

Phase 2: Retaining Teachers

The second phase, the semi-structured interview approach of positive teacher recruitment and retention, involves supporting and retaining teachers once hired. This phase focuses on building a positive work environment, supporting professional growth, and promoting job satisfaction. The following are key components of the second phase:

- Onboarding and orientation: Providing a thorough orientation process for new hires, including clear expectations, training, and support.
- Professional development: Offering ongoing training and support to help teachers grow and develop their skills.
- Job satisfaction: Creating a positive work environment that values and supports teachers, including opportunities for collaboration, recognition, and feedback.
- Work-life balance: Supporting teachers in balancing their personal and professional lives, including offering flexible schedules, incentives, leave options, and supportive policies.

Retention refers to keeping qualified teachers in the profession and within a particular school or district. Teachers who feel valued, supported, and connected to their schools are more likely to stay in the profession and remain in their current positions, which can reduce turnover and improve student outcomes. Effective retention strategies include:

- offering competitive salaries and benefits,
- providing opportunities for professional development and advancement,
- fostering a positive school culture and supportive working environment, and
- developing mentorship and induction programs for new teachers.

High-leverage practices for recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers include targeted recruitment efforts to increase diversity, rigorous and fair hiring processes involving multiple stakeholders, and retention strategies that provide competitive compensation and benefits, professional development opportunities, and a positive school culture. These practices aim to address teacher shortages, ensure a diverse teaching workforce, and improve teacher satisfaction and well-being, ultimately leading to improved quality of teaching and learning in schools.

Implications

The 2022 Texas Teacher Poll conducted by the Charles Butt Foundation found that 97% of the teachers said a positive work culture and environment would encourage them to remain in their jobs (p. 5). Therefore, to retain teachers, we must improve their working environment. This will involve providing respect for the profession of education and lowering the stress experienced by teachers caused by thrusting a multitude of additional responsibilities on them (i.e., suicide prevention, behavior management, and social skills). In today's current environment, mental health and school safety are critical concerns in everyone's mind. These crucial responsibilities have become increasingly demanding for teachers. Thus, providing

adequate support for teachers may mean employing more support personnel or providing additional shared service co-ops. Offering genuine respect for the teaching profession while providing them with additional support may improve teachers' working environment, hopefully retaining current teachers, and attracting new teachers into the field of education.

While acknowledging the importance of recruiting teachers of color, the urgent need for more teachers in rural areas is currently a pressing issue for administrators. With the inevitable "rural flight" (Hyde, 1997, p. 42), the actual survival of some small rural school districts is in danger (Moller, Moller, & Schmidt, 2016). Hyde (1997) stated that "rural communities are no more than one generation away from extinction" (p. 45). Due to this stark reality, rural administrators do all they can to keep their school doors open. The participants in this study shared that they would like to hire more teachers of color, but the sad reality at this point is that *"I am just trying to find a teacher"* (Participant One), or *"We need teachers in the classroom!"* (Participant Two)."

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The scope of the study's data collection was restricted to only two regions within Texas. Additionally, the sampling methodology was intentionally limited to administrators from remote rural school districts, as defined by NCES and TEA. Therefore, the perceptions and experiences reported by these administrators cannot be extrapolated to represent all small rural schools in Texas or beyond. It is important to acknowledge that the findings may not reflect the experiences of administrators from other types of rural schools or those from different geographical locations.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the study may have been influenced by the researchers' affiliation with a University Educator Preparation Program (EPP) leadership program. This association could potentially introduce bias in the data collection and analysis, which may impact the validity and generalizability of the findings. While the researchers' expertise and knowledge may have benefited the study, it is essential to acknowledge and consider any potential biases when interpreting the results.

Shared services are defined as "a financial arrangement between an eligible grantee organization serving as fiscal agent and one or more school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, or Education Service Centers (ESCs) as members" (TEA, 2017, p.1). One recommendation for future research is to investigate whether shared service arrangements influence academic outcomes and resource allocation in rural schools. The additional research in this area could shed light on how shared services might influence teacher retention in rural locales.

As the number of migrants to the United States continues to rise, rural schools face limitations. They must take proactive steps to acquire additional resources to support students who require languages other than English (Budiman et al., 2020). Therefore, another recommendation for future research is to investigate effective strategies for rural schools to provide adequate resources and support for students who need to learn languages other than English. In order to account for the variations between different types of rural communities as defined by the NCES, further research may be necessary to investigate the differences between schools located in fringe, distant, remote, and charter regions.

Concluding remarks

To ensure that our schools can effectively educate the next generation, we need to work together as a society to provide access to high-quality teachers for all students. The research study identified several themes, including practices for supporting teachers, collaborative efforts

within the community, and promoting work/life balance to enhance teachers' job satisfaction. These practices can benefit any school district seeking to improve the lives of its teachers. While some initiatives, like a 4-day school week or paying stipends, may only be feasible in certain areas, it is crucial to consider the unique characteristics of the community when implementing strategies for hiring, recruiting, and retaining teachers in line with the principles of place-conscious theory (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

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