

An Exploratory Examination of What Types of Administrative Support Matter for Rural Teacher Talent Management: The Rural Educator Perspective

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Administrative support has been frequently identified as the most important factor influencing teachers' employment decisions (Burkhauser, 2017; Ladd, 2011). While many rural schools operate in hard-to-staff contexts that suffer from severe teacher shortages, it is unknown if rural teachers require rural context specific administrative support. This study was designed to shed light on this issue by first confirming with a sample of South Carolina rural educators (n=28) through an open-ended survey that administrative support is the most important factor to advertise for teacher recruitment. The study then obtains the perspectives of a subsample of the educators (n=12), via in-depth interviews, to provide more details concerning the types of administrative supports that matter for rural teacher retention and whether the supports should differ for new vs. more seasoned teachers. Several important themes emerged from the interview findings including verification of the necessity of rural specific administrative support due to adequate rural teaching preparation, building relational trust (from open communication), providing mentorship, offering financial incentives, advertising the community, maintaining administrative consistency/stability, and providing teachers with a positive, collaborative and open work culture. Results and implications for leadership development are discussed.

Keywords: teacher talent management, rural schools, teacher retention, teacher recruitment, rural teachers, administrative support

Teacher shortages are problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that school staffing problems have been found to be negatively associated with student learning (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Because teachers can influence students' long-term financial outcomes (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2013), that negative association can have life-altering effects. While there is some debate concerning whether a national teacher shortage exists (Taie & Goldring, 2017), the fact that the teacher supply is inequitably distributed is less controversial.

High-needs schools, which serve higher proportions of minority and low-achieving students from low-income households, are often located in economically impoverished rural and urban contexts that experience greater staffing problems and student performance challenges than their counterparts (Balu, Beteille, & Loeb, 2009; Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2007). Teacher staffing research has primarily focused on recruitment and retention in urban teacher labor markets (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002), often to the exclusion of the same issues in rural contexts (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Due to their remote locations, lack of amenities, and low salary offerings, poor rural schools often face extreme challenges with hiring and retaining qualified teachers (Jimerson, 2003; Maranto & Schuls, 2012; Schaefer, Mattingly, & Johnson, 2016). In a national study of teacher labor markets spanning across nearly 15 years, Player (2015) found that rural schools were much more likely to report challenges with hiring English Language Learners and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) teachers than their urban counterparts. Indeed, when it comes to the *rural school problem*, many have suggested the problem is rooted in challenges associated with rural teacher recruitment and retention (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Miller, 2008a). Consequently, in response to the U.S. Department of Education's report on rural education, the University Council for Educational Administration's (UCEA) top recommendation was to stabilize the rural educator workforce (UCEA, 2018).

Literature Review

The strategies that have been implemented to address teacher shortages have primarily been financial in nature. The following section reviews the research that has examined the potential efficacy of various financial teacher staffing strategies. Given the dearth of research specifically targeting rural teacher staffing, the literature of both rural and non-rural teacher staffing strategies are reviewed, emphasizing the rural focus when appropriate.

Base Salaries and Bonuses

Arguably one of the most researched teacher staffing strategies is the proposal to increase teacher salaries. The focus on salary is understandable given its cited salience by both potential (Tran & Smith, 2019a) and current (Horn, 2009) teachers and some evidence suggesting its potential utility. For example, Hendricks (2014) found that increasing base pay reduces turnover, especially for newer teachers. Ondrich, Pas, and Yinger (2008) likewise found teachers with higher relative salaries than non-teachers in the same county are less likely to leave.

Targeted bonuses, which are limited term financial incentives, also have been a widely implemented teacher recruitment strategy. Cowan and Goldhaber (2018) found that bonuses for National Board Certified Teachers helped recruit and retain high quality teachers in low social-economic settings. Similarly, Glazerman, Protik, Teh, Bruch, and Max (2013) conducted a randomized experiment of 10 districts in 7 states and found a targeted bonus program to be

effective in recruiting and short-term retention of high-quality teacher transfers. Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd, and Vigdor (2008) found that a bonus program reduced mean turnover rates of the targeted teachers by 17%, but there was widespread misunderstanding of retention incentives. Regardless of their short-term effectiveness, the question concerning whether the teachers will stay after the bonus is paid out has been a criticism of this strategy.

Scholarships and Loan Forgiveness

Policymakers also often utilize service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs to improve teacher staffing. For example, Feng and Sass (2018) found a loan forgiveness program reduced attrition rates for middle and high school math and science teachers by 10.4 and 8.9%, respectively, and special education teachers by 12.3%. Liou and Lawrenz (2011) found that scholarships with high-needs school service requirements were not viewed by recipients as highly influential to stimulate them to enter the teaching profession but somewhat influential in the decision to teach in a high-needs school. Likewise, Steele, Murname, and Willett (2010) found a student loan forgiveness program with a 4-year service requirement in a low-performing school increased recipients probability of teaching in such schools by 28%. However, 75% persisted in teaching in low-performing schools into their fourth year, representing a higher risk of departure than teachers who did not receive the incentives.

While the use of financial incentives shows some promise to address teacher staffing, one major limitation related to the use of financial incentives such as salary increases and loan forgiveness concerns the sustainability of such strategies and the resources needed to employ them (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). This is especially the case for poor rural school districts that are often located in areas with low property values. Therefore, the residents are not able to pay sufficient property tax to employ the aforementioned financial incentives. While financial strategies should be employed because of their effectiveness, they require unpopular actions, like property tax demands, to ensure that rural schools are adequately staffed in a sustainable manner. Moreover, there may be an even more important factor for rural teacher employment that has largely escaped policy attention: administrative support.

Improved Administrative Support and Leadership

School administrative support has been reported to be the most important factor for pre-service and current teachers when considering employment in a district (Horng, 2009; Robinson, 2012; Tran & Smith, 2019b). Boyd et al. (2011) defined administrative support as, the extent to which principals and other school leaders make teachers' work easier and help them to improve their teaching. Administrative support can assume a variety of forms—ranging from providing teachers with professional development opportunities to protecting them from district office mandates. (p. 305)

Past studies have found that the greatest influence of teacher retention are teachers' perceptions of school administration (Boyd et al., 2011; Burkhauser, 2017; Ladd, 2011), and that administrative mentorship support is especially critical for keeping beginning teachers in high poverty schools (Haynes, 2014). This importance has been found (Horng, 2009; Robinson, 2012) to eclipse even that of student characteristics such as low-income status, performance, and ethnic minority background, which have been found to be associated with turnover in the literature (Hanushek, et al., 2004; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2007). Sutchter et al. (2016) argued that,

Although money can help, teachers are primarily attracted by principals who are good instructional leaders, by like-minded colleagues who are committed to the same goals, by having the teaching conditions and instructional materials they need readily available, and by having learning supports that enable them to be effective. (p. 66)

With particular relevance to the rural context, Preston and Barnes (2017) reviewed 40 research studies from 2005 to 2015 and identified the importance of people-centered leadership for successful rural school administration, including building trust, promoting collaborations, soliciting staff input, encouraging a culture where teachers are empowered to take risks with new ideas, and providing administrative support in general.

Tran and Smith (2019b) conducted a mixed-method analysis to understand the relative importance of different working characteristics for college students at a regional university. Culled from the teacher recruitment literature, these included factors that range from pecuniary factors (e.g., medical benefits, base salary, annual raises, forgivable college loans) to non-pecuniary factors (e.g., class size, administrative support, input on school decisions, amicable colleagues, clean school facilities). Respondents cited administrative support as the most salient factor influencing their consideration to teach in a hard-to-staff rural school.

While there appears to be some consensus concerning the importance of administrative support for teacher employment, it is still unclear what differentiated types of support are necessary for different types of environments. Different geographic contexts are associated with different challenges, requiring different types of administrative support. For example, teachers may need support dealing with and navigating small town politics in a small rural school that may not be necessary in a large urban setting. While urban schools have primarily been the focus of research. In this study we focus on the rural context.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

We rely on the theory of contextual leadership (Noman, Awang Hashim, & Shaik Abdullah, 2018) to guide our work. The theory suggests that the type of support and leadership required from rural school principals to their teachers would differ from what is needed for principals from other contexts. Because rural students are no less important than their urban counterparts, it is imperative to confront the politics of recognition that regards rural schools to be less important than urban schools (Cuervo, 2016). One mechanism to improve this recognition justice is to acknowledge the need for differentiated school leadership support. This view would recognize different cultures and values of rural locales to enhance the dignity, self-esteem and self-respect of rural people. Consequently, we pose two questions for exploration:

1. *Which characteristics of working at their rural schools should rural schools advertise to recruit new teachers?*

Based on the literature that has consistently identified administrative support as the most important factor for teacher employment (Hornig, 2009; Tran & Smith, 2019b), we hypothesize that administrative support will be the highest ranked characteristic, especially within the rural context. This is because rural schools, by virtue of their size, have more flexibility and less bureaucracy (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995), which can be a catalyst for a more supportive school environment. If our hypothesis is supported, we follow-up with the question:

2. *What type of administrative support is necessary to retain teachers in rural schools?*

With the second question, we further differentiate between the type of support needed for teachers in their initial three years of teaching, and the support required for more seasoned teachers. The

former group is what Huberman (1989) referred to as beginning teachers, which he argues are in career entry or *survival* mode and therefore require different supports than non-beginning teachers. For example, early career teachers may require much more specificity concerning feedback and suggestions, whereas seasoned teachers require more room to expand and grow (including mentorship and leadership opportunities). By addressing both geographic context and teacher career stage for support, our research provides nuance to an understudied topic.

Context

U.S. News & World Report compiles a state ranking of Pre-K through 12th grade education that heavily weights college readiness, graduate rates, test scores, pre-K quality, and preschool enrollment. In the most recent rankings, South Carolina ranked 43rd of 50 states (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Given that teacher quality impacts student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Ducommun, 2007; Harris & Sass, 2011), the increasing teacher supply problem in the state of South Carolina is likely a contributing factor to this low ranking. The ranking also highlights the inequity of educational opportunities provided to the state's students. Region specific issues (e.g., economic disparity; rural and urban attractiveness) in South Carolina may contribute to the state's well-documented severe teacher shortages (Garrett, 2017). Though South Carolina is a mostly rural state (Tran, 2018), rurality is not monolithic (Eppley, 2015). Therefore, we focus on a specific rural region, defined by counties that are located on the coastline of South Carolina, geographically known as the Lowcountry, to capture region specific nuanced findings.

Methods

This study is comprised of two phases of data collection. In the first phase, the full sample of participants completed a brief overview survey inquiring demographic information and their suggestions for characteristics of working at their rural school that should be advertised to recruit new teachers. In the second phase, a subsample of 12 participants (11 teachers and one principal) agreed to participate in semi-structured follow-up interviews (Glesne & Peshkin, 1991) to provide additional insight on the administrative support necessary for teacher employment in their rural, hard-to-staff context. The perspective of the principal was included in the qualitative interviews because her insight on the provision of administrative support in a rural context would be unique from the teachers, but also directly relevant as a complement to the teachers' perspective.

The primary goal of the study was to explore what types of administrative support matter for rural teachers recruitment. To accomplish this goal, we conducted a phenomenological qualitative research design. Phenomenology refers to research that studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thoughts, emotion, and social activities (Smith, 2006). Phenomenology is helpful in probing human behavior in educational administration and disciplinary practice, and serves as a useful tool to help scholars interpret their work (Van Manen, 2007).

We took several steps to enhance the validity of the findings. First, we conducted member checking with respondents to ensure that their responses were accurately captured. Second, we created graphs that provided a detailed descriptions of how we conducted the interviews, the measures we took to ensure the accuracy of interviews, observations, and the evidence from which the findings were grounded (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Finally, to improve reliability of the data analyses, two researchers independently conducted the coding of the

qualitative data and the convergent themes were identified as patterns. We also spent time reflecting and discussing the divergent themes to better understand and reconcile points of differentiation to highlight nuanced interpretation to our findings.

Sample

It is important to gain a better understanding of the specifics concerning respondents' familiarity with teaching in their rural contexts because different contexts require different types of support. To do this, we utilized a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) to target only educators from South Carolina rural Lowcountry school districts. The 28 educators that we sampled (representing an 80% response rate) were from one of five Lowcountry school districts, which are located in economically challenged and underdeveloped rural communities from historically marginalized regions of the country. Within these districts, many of the schools are unsurprisingly struggling with limited resources and insufficient financial support, both from the state and the local governments, due to plant closures and declining tax bases (Tran, 2018).

The survey inquired about demographic information from respondents such as their gender, education level, whether they currently live in the Lowcountry, their distance of commute from home to work, as well as years working at their current district, school and in Lowcountry. In addition, we also inquired about their years teaching in rural (but non-Lowcountry areas) and in non-rural areas.

According to survey responses, the full sample of participants spent an average of 7.79 years teaching at their current schools, 9.74 years teaching in the rural Lowcountry and 4.6 years teaching in rural schools (outside of the Lowcountry) in general. In contrast, they spent an average of 2.85 years at a non-rural school; although, 66% of participants indicated that they had no teaching experiences in such locales, and about 17% indicated that they had less than 5 years of experience teaching in non-rural settings. As reflective of the general teaching population, the majority of participants identified as female (65.71%) and held a bachelor's degree (71.43%) as their highest educational attainment. Males represented 34.29% of participants, and those who held a master's degree and master's plus credit comprised 34.29% and 20% respectively. Associates, specialist, or doctoral degrees were held by approximately 2.86% of participants. The majority (59.75%) of participating education professionals were from elementary schools, although middle (11.38%) and high schools (14.22%) also were present. Figure 2 provides information about the five-year career plan for the sampled rural educators—including whether they intend to stay employed in their current position or geographic location. The majority intended to stay in their current roles.

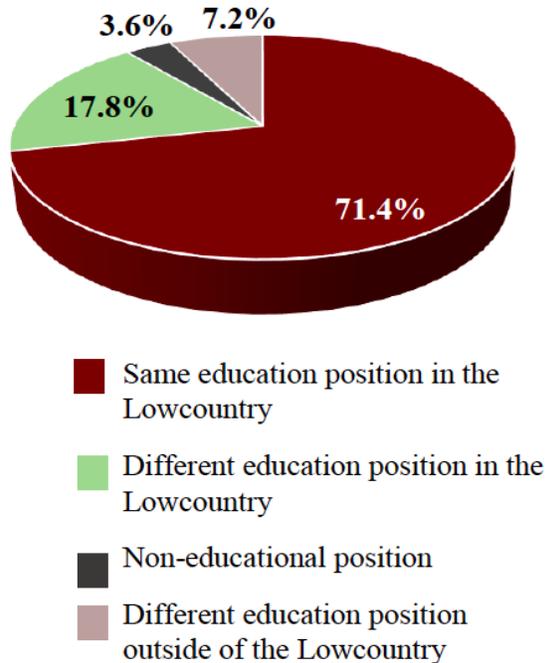


Figure 1. Five-Year Career Plan for Current Rural Educators

The survey also observed participant commutes and the circumstances of those commutes. Participants noted that they traveled an average of 18.23 miles one way in their work commute. While most (46.5%) indicated only having to travel 1-10 miles to work, there are a significant portion of participants (7.1%) that travel more than 60 miles to work daily. The latter distance was referenced by some respondents who were so satisfied with their current employment situation that they were willing to make the commute. Past researchers have suggested teachers prefer to work close to where they grew up (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). This was supported by the fact that the majority of participants (56.3%) shared that they grew up in the Lowcountry; however, a substantial percentage (43.7%) of respondents did not.

Qualitative Interviews

We employed qualitative methods to obtain data from rural educators through semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009) with a subset (n=12) of the larger sample to understand what types of administrative support rural teachers perceive as critical for retention of new teachers and non-new teachers respectively. A \$100 incentive was provided for each interviewee.

The interviews were transcribed using Nivivo and REV. These interview transcripts used qualitative data analysis including both inductive and deductive coding (Glesne & Peshkin, 1991; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Saldana, 2013). There were two rounds of coding. The first round focused on theming the data, which began with an open coding process in which the research team members examined interview transcripts individually and then as a team to identify the common themes within the transcripts. These themes appeared based on participants' perspective on what types of administrative support they thought were important for teacher retention. The second round of coding featured a deductive approach, utilizing codes from the literature (e.g., rural school leadership) to develop a set of themes for related codes with initial categorization and

subcategories (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Saldana, 2013). We analyzed the teacher interviews in relation to each research question.

Results

Survey Findings

In an open-ended response format, respondents were asked what characteristics of working at their rural school should be advertised to recruit new teachers to their schools. Respondents were not restricted to only identifying one working characteristic, so numerous participants listed more than one. For example, Teacher A might list “Technology” and “Family oriented culture,” whereas Teacher B might list “Administrative support” and “Family oriented culture.” Consistent with our hypothesis based on the literature, the most frequently mentioned category was administrative support. This and the ranking for the remaining top 9 categories can be seen in Table 1. As mentioned earlier, these characteristics were not mutually exclusive for teacher respondents, so they were able to identify more than one characteristic that they considered advantageous to advertise (this results in the overall percentage not equating to 100%).

Table 1.

Teacher identified rural working characteristics for advertisement to recruit new teachers

Identified Rural Advantages for Teacher Employment	Percent
Administrative support	48.15%
Family oriented culture	44.44%
Community willing to offer support (e.g., supplies, volunteer)	33.33%
Smaller class size	29.63%
Deeper Connection with Students (e.g., watching them grow up)	29.63%
Technology	25.93%
Friendly environment	18.52%
Autonomy in classroom	18.52%
Leadership opportunities	14.81%

Note. Percentages do not total 100 because participants were able to list more than one category.

Interview Findings

Interviews conducted with the rural educators showed several aspects of rural administrative support that are critical for teacher retention. The results reflect the necessity of rural specific administrative support due to adequate rural teaching preparation, building relational trust (built from open communication), providing mentorship, offering financial incentives, advertising the community, maintaining administrative consistency/stability, and providing teachers a positive, collaborative, and open work culture.

Lack of Adequate Rural Specific Teaching Preparation

Many interviewees were not originally from the Lowcountry area and most of the respondents indicated that they were not adequately prepared by their teacher preparation program to teach in

a rural context. This is especially true for those who did not conduct their practicum in a rural school. Succinctly put by one teacher, “The actual teacher preparation itself, I don’t think prepared me for a rural, small school district.” Several interviewees criticized their teacher preparation program’s over-emphasis on theory and suggested the need for more diversified field experience. One 20-year veteran recalled that she was better prepared for rural teaching through her substitute teaching experience with the district than her teacher preparation program. Even teachers that grew up in the local rural community agreed their formal teacher preparation did not prepare them to work with their students. Because many teachers did not receive adequate rural specific teacher pre-service preparation, this necessitated rural specific administrative support when they eventually ended up in the field.

Relational Trust (from Open Communication)

Open communication between principals and teachers was often cited as critical for the provision of adequate administrative support. One teacher explained that this entailed a space where teachers could “talk to [the principal] without any backlash...that [the principal] can express the way [he/she] feels, or [his/her] concerns without having any retaliation.” Because of the high teacher turnover experienced by many of the rural high poverty schools, there are concerns that administrative feedback to new teachers may be taken personally and result in the teacher leaving without an easy replacement. As one mid-career teacher explained,

The turnover rate ... has been high also...For new teachers coming into the workforce, this is the first job. This is their first boss that they have ever encountered, so her word is gold, or his word is gold. The way discipline or the way something needs to be improved in a classroom needs to be said in a manner that it's not a personal thing, and I don't know how to tell a first-year teacher it's not personal. It's hard. It really is.

For more seasoned teachers, they want to know that an “open-door policy” is there with administrators to voice “their concerns and problems...to have somebody sit there and listen,” especially if they want to “run” ideas by them.

Providing Mentorship

One of the elements that most teachers mentioned to improve retention rate is mentorship. As one teacher explained, “Whether it's a new teacher or as long as you're new to that school district, it is necessary that the school/school district to provide some amount of mentorship.” Another teacher who has been teaching 13 years in the Lowcountry shared that mid-career teachers could serve as mentors for beginning teachers, and veteran teachers could be a sounding board to discuss strategies with the mentor to help support and retain them.

While mentorship is important, the mere provision of a mentor for teachers is not sufficient. Principals must ensure that the mentors are providing the requisite support to teachers, otherwise the teachers may still turnover. This was exemplified in the experience one first-year teacher shared about her former beginning teacher colleague who was struggling with her students. The colleague explained that she was assigned a mentor, but “the mentor was also very busy, so she didn’t get...what she needed. So, she left and never came back.” The teacher explained that if the mentor had been a partner teacher, teaching the same class as her, they would have had more opportunities to talk about the students. Because rural educators often have to wear “multiple hats” given the small school structure, the suggestion of having teacher partners was meant to reduce

the additional work duties of the mentor. The logic is that if the mentor's mentorship role is a closely related extension of his/her current duties, this increases the likelihood the mentor would be able to adequately serve a support role for new teachers.

Financial Issues

Many teachers identified the need for more pay or funded professional development to increase rural teacher employment but were also aware of the economic challenges associated with offering those in an economically impoverished rural context (which often pay less than other school districts because of less revenue generated from the lower rural property values). Therefore, one beginning teacher suggested an alternative to more pay, such as flexible scheduling (working a four day a week schedule instead of five). Moreover, while financial incentives are important, one seasoned teacher cautioned that financial incentives may fill rural vacancies, but appropriate support is needed for teacher retention:

I don't know why they [new rural teachers] came here other than maybe there was incentive for them to be here, a monetary incentive, and that was the reason they came here. But I do know that the teachers that stick to teaching in a rural area, they need a lot of support.

According to her, this support included teaching and resource assistance, the latter of which is particularly relevant given that "a lot of our teachers put their own money into the classroom."

Selling the School and Introducing Teachers to the Students/Community

Many teachers noted the importance of being introduced to the community as a critical, rural-specific administrative support. Even a 30-year veteran teacher shared her need for this, "I came to a new district and I still have to learn even though I taught 30 years. I had not taught in [this rural] county. So, there is a difference coming from an affluent country to a more rural county." One sixth of the total sample participants were international teachers, so they had the complexities of having cultural differences and attitudes towards education from their homeland, which was compounded by their lack of familiarity with the rural communities. One teacher noted the importance of "Making them [rural teachers] feel more welcomed. Inviting them to take part of things in the community... invite them to church, invite them out to dinner."

Indeed Ulferts (2016) suggested that "rural communities need to make every effort to include teacher transplants into the social fabric of the community lessening the isolation many rural teachers experience. To lessen social and geographic isolation, rural leaders need to take action to develop a stronger community connection with rural teachers" (p. 20). This includes inclusion of new rural teachers to community gatherings, book clubs, etc., all in an effort to familiarize the community and rural teacher with each other. A 30-year veteran teacher remembered that her principal took her on the Gullah tour several years ago and showed her the neighborhood and how the students lived. During the tour, the principal not only provided background history of the students' families to the new teachers but also pointed out the issues that children living in the rural areas were facing and how those issues differed from children in more urban or suburban environments. This tour seemed to be highly educational for the new teachers and helped them better understand their students.

Personal relationships with rural residents, especially romantic ones, have been linked with teacher retention as well (Rooks, 2018). Supporting evidence from research in the past, participants from this study noted the importance of romantic connections for their recruitment and retention

and cited the “lack of available singles” as a deterrent for attracting teaching talent. Even though the rural community may not offer a variety of options for young adults looking for a partner, teachers receive other social benefits when they are plugged into the community and its activities. This is particularly salient for teachers because rural schools represent a hub for the local community (Eppley, 2015).

Maintaining Administrative Consistency/Stability

While administrative support is important, it may not always be there. Some respondents shared that their schools experienced high levels of teacher turnover that often was a result of lacking consistent support. In support of the literature (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Jacob, Goddard, Kim, Miller, & Goddard, 2015), respondents noted that lack of consistent administrative support often exists because of leadership turnover, which then promotes teacher turnover. One teacher explained how constant principal turnover sustained *uncertainty* for teachers, which was particularly damaging for new teachers who often were already in survival mode. Being a first-year teacher in a school with a first-year principal meant that both had a *learning curve*, so the requisite administrative support was not always there. Another teacher explained that superintendent turnover is just as problematic, having experienced eight superintendents, six principals and four assistant principals in the time span of ten years.

One teacher shared that her district was very clear that “we’re a training ground. They recruit the teachers from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, those areas. Bring them down here, they work for three to five years, and then go back because they realize, at least [this] county, is challenging.” This set the tone that given the hardships associated with the local environment, the district has a reputation of being a temporary or transitional employer by many.

Providing a Positive, Collaborative and Open Work Culture

Unfortunately, multiple teacher respondents shared the sentiment that the district focus is often on recruitment while neglecting retention. Study participants expressed the importance of having a positive work culture. A first-year teacher said the teacher camaraderie in the Lowcountry is more close-knit and connected than that of the big cities. When she taught in Texas, she noticed they had a lot of funding and resources, but the teachers viewed the class as “always my class, my class, my class” whereas the rural teachers shared resources and supported each other. Another teacher stated that the close-knit connections in the school make the faculty like a “family” and the administrator supports that cohesion. She said the current administrator does a great job, facilitating support between teachers and allowing teachers to have their voices heard. Being loyal and professional means having the integrity to support teachers by enforcing policies, despite small town politics. The rural principal participant elaborated:

If someone has done something that is not right, that's against policy, and you are following the code of conduct and policy. And this is your business partner's child, you're still going to be ethical, but causes a rift. I've been told ‘Do you not know who this is?’ You're still going to do the right thing. Even threatened. ‘You don't know who you're messing with.’ You're still going to do the right thing, but being in a small town, small rural town, that can be complicated as well. It has its pros and its cons.

Overall, the interview findings demonstrate that while some aspects of good administrative support for teacher retention may be universal, there are unique challenges in rural high poverty districts that require differentiated leadership support.

Conclusion

Survey data from our research supported the importance of administrative support for rural teacher employment. Qualitative data obtained from participant interviews were then used to ascertain the perspectives of rural teachers concerning what types of administrative support they felt were required to attract and sustain rural teacher employment. Our findings support researchers who have suggested that teacher preparation programs often do not adequately prepare teachers for rural placements, resulting in teachers either seeking non-rural positions upon graduation or leaving rural positions for non-rural ones shortly after employment (Moffa, 2018). This is problematic because teachers that lack rural teaching experience in their preparation program have been found to be less willing to teach in rural schools (Tran, Hogue, & Moon, 2015).

Furthermore, one notable difference between the new and experienced rural teachers was the type of support needed. For example, veteran teachers mentioned needing to have their voices be heard, while the new teachers expressed greater needs for mentorship. New teachers also require introduction and assistance with integration into the community (including experienced teachers who are new to the school). Contextual circumstances (e.g., principal turnover) associated with high poverty rural schools also exacerbated traditional support needs. These problems require nuanced rural-specific solutions.

Implications for Leadership Preparation and Development

Drawing on our findings, we suggest that leadership preparation and development should prepare administrators with knowledge concerning how to provide the rural specific support necessary for teachers to gain self-efficacy and develop/maintain the organizational commitment for their retention in the hard-to-staff context. In this study, we highlight several areas worth emphasizing in teacher staffing efforts. It suggests that one of the most effective rural teaching staffing strategies is “rooted within the community” (Hammer et al., 2005, p. 12). Given that rural communities offer stronger community relations and deeper camaraderie of teachers and students, schools can leverage this strength by integrating teachers into the community. Full integration into rural communities can serve to mitigate feelings of social isolation, a contributing factor to rural turnover (Anttilla & Vaananen, 2013). Personal relationships with long-time rural residents and the formation of dense social networks have been found to promote rural teacher retention (Rooks, 2018), which this study supports as well. Indeed, the human connections make the job hard to walk away from. Therefore, it is important that new teachers are welcomed and connected to the community (Hammer et al., 2005). In fact, socializing in the community has been found to be critical and related to teacher efficacy in other work (Adams & Wood, 2015). Through a rural school district’s continual onboarding process, teachers can be included in community activities and social activities through religious and civic organizations.

Another recommendation for rural school districts is to connect the teachers in rural schools to advanced education resources. Teachers from rural communities can take continuing education classes online or be a part of an online degree program. The rural teachers can focus on their

professional development by taking online classes so that they can learn about pedagogy and best practices without having to travel a long distance to attend graduate level classes.

Finally, rural principals can develop their strengths in many of the support areas to improve teacher retention. This can be done through professional development, which may also serve the needs of maintaining consistency of leadership stability. In their evaluation of a principal professional development program, Jacob et al. (2017) suggested that a key lever to retaining rural teachers is retaining rural principals. The program was found to be effective for improving principal and teacher retention, supporting the value of principal development for multiple outcomes.

Of course, this study, like all research, has its limitations. Because of the small sample size and purposive sampling methodology (Patton, 2015), there are limitations concerning the generalizability of the findings. While this study is not statistically representative of all rural teachers, the use of a focused qualitative study allows us “to glean insights from the data that would have broad significance” (Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010, p. 624) by gaining in depth where breadth was not achieved. In particular, drawn through rural educator perspectives, the findings of this study illustrate the importance of the provision of talent centered education leadership (TCELI, 2019), especially in the areas of administrative support. Different supports such as building relational trust, provision of mentorship, connecting teachers with community, offering incentives, and providing respect, loyalty, and a voice are important strategies that matter for rural teacher talent management. Future research should empirically examine whether these types of support matter differently in other contexts (e.g., suburban, ~~suburban~~ and urban communities) to provide better understanding of how contextual leadership can be best leveraged to lead schools.

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