

# Recruiting Highly Effective Teachers in Rural Schools: An Appreciative Inquiry

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## Abstract

This study explores the successful strategies used by rural schools for recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers as the ongoing shortage of new, highly effective teachers in rural areas, who might increase student performance. Appreciative Inquiry was utilized to analyze contemporary perspectives critically. Findings indicate that encouraging college students to stay and teach in their rural communities, promoting fiscal responsibility in school districts, and creating mentorship programs for new hires helped recruit and retain effective teachers. In addition, these findings can assist initiate conversations about how rural schools should identify and encourage the next generation of teachers.

**Keywords:** educational leadership, rural school, teacher recruitment, teacher retention, education policy/administration

## 1. Introduction

Rural educators face unique challenges, such as the lack of access to professional development opportunities, lower salaries and benefits, multiple extracurricular duties, and professional isolation (National Education Association, 2019). Therefore, recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in rural areas is more likely complicated than in urban schools, even though the need for exceptional educators is higher.

In Kentucky, a significant portion of students is being educated in rural school districts because almost half of Kentucky's population lives in rural areas (Wayne, 2018). Despite this fact, the efforts to reform education focus almost exclusively on two of the largest school districts in the state, Jefferson and Fayette counties (Trinidad & Paperny, 2019). According to the Kentucky Department of Education's *Kentucky Education Facts*, in the school year 2018-2019, there are 172 school districts and 1466 public schools in Kentucky (Kentucky Department of Education, 2019). Therefore, we need to ensure that not only the two biggest school districts in Kentucky have highly qualified teachers, but also the remaining 170 school districts.

To inform and assist education leaders toward overcoming this challenge, we used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) research approach to conduct interviews with educators and school administrators on the crucial needs of teachers in rural areas. The AI research approach enabled us to learn the challenges they face and the personal stories of how they deal with and overcome issues. In addition, using this research approach allowed us to share positive results our interviewees shared with us and strategic innovations they have implemented with our readers that might be educational leaders in an area with similar circumstances. Monk's (2007) research indicates that the smallest schools face the most significant hiring and retention challenges. This article will share our interviews with educators in rural school districts of eastern Kentucky and suggest practical ways to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in rural areas.

## 2. Review of Literature

### *2.1 Definition of Rural Schools and Rural Communities*

Rural schools have historically received a lack of research attention from academia, thereby worsening the hurdles of rural students, rural educators, and rural schools (Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015; Lavalley, 2018). In addition, critical policy issues regarding rural schools (e.g., lower literacy, lower college attendance, teacher attrition, funding, poverty, inequality) have also been neglected. Rural schools are classified as those with 500 or fewer students in small towns of fewer than 2,500 residents, in communities often a long geographic distance from large and metropolitan settings, often with agricultural or other industries that rely on seasonal or migrant labor (Barton, 2012).

The characteristics of rural communities adversely affect teacher recruitment and retention. These negative influences include distances to larger cities with better human services such as medical care, housing, entertainment, and shopping; distances to family and friends; and higher

poverty rates (Monk, 2007). Around 46 million Americans live in rural areas, and "one-half of school districts, one-third of schools, and one-fifth of students in the United States are located in rural areas" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 1). Even though there is a smaller percentage of students in rural schools now than twenty years ago, the two discussions are still relevant today: the recruitment and retention of rural teachers and the second, teaching subjects outside their certifications.

### *2.2 Characteristics of Rural Students*

The overarching characteristics of students in rural schools are the high poverty rates associated with them. According to Schaefer, Matingly, and Johnson (2016), 64% of rural counties have high child poverty, compared to 47% of urban counties. This means that more than three-quarters of counties with persistent high child poverty have a substantial minority child population. High child-poverty rate clusters include Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, much of the Southeast, parts of the Southwest, and the Great Plains. In particular, child poverty rates are dramatically lower for non-Hispanic whites than for minority children, regardless of the racial-ethnic composition of the counties where they live.

Achievement rates are also lower for rural students in a large gap between rural and suburban students, less access to advanced courses such as the Advanced Placement (AP) program, and less likelihood to attend and graduate from college (Lavalley, 2018). Rural students also face issues with diversity, language barriers, and special needs Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in their schools and communities (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). All of these factors negatively affect the students' dreams and their potential. In turn, they also adversely affect teaching and learning, the rural communities, and the rural way of life. Because of these factors, it is hard to be considered a highly effective teacher in a rural school.

### *2.3 Characteristics of Highly Effective Teachers*

Several research studies have examined the characteristics of highly effective teachers. These include having certifications in the field in which they are teaching, being prepared in the classroom, displaying a positive attitude, holding high expectations, being creative, being fair, having a personal touch, creating a sense of belonging, being compassionate, having a sense of humor, respecting students, being forgiving, and admitting mistakes (Pressley et al., 2020). Also, emotional resilience is a crucial trait of a highly effective teacher (Aguilar, 2018). Unfortunately, these characteristics are more challenging in rural schools because of barriers like the lack of administrative support for rural teachers (Goodpaster et al., 2012; Lavalley, 2018), school leadership issues, and negative work environments (Lavalley, 2018; Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

### *2.4 Characteristics of Rural Educators*

The rural educator is often from a rural community who returns home to teach after graduating from college (Lavalley, 2018). Other characteristics of them include having alternative certifications, fewer advanced degrees, and less educational background (Goodpaster et al., 2012; Lavalley, 2018). Teachers in rural schools also tend to graduate from less-selective colleges (Megan, 2018). In contrast, the more qualified teachers who graduate from, the more

selective colleges are in higher demand and tend to go elsewhere (Lavalley, 2018).

### *2.5 Teacher Shortage and High Turnover*

Even though there is not a shortage of teachers at the national level, there are still shortages in schools characterized as "rural, high-poverty, high-minority, and low-achieving" and in "subject areas such as math, science, and special ed" (Aragon, 2016, p. 5). When special characteristics are combined with one or more subject areas, the realities are even grimmer (Lavalley, 2018).

It is challenging to recruit and retain teachers in rural areas for the STEM subjects, special education, English language development, and foreign languages (Barton, 2012; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Goodpaster et al., 2012; Lavalley, 2018; Sindelar, et al., 2018). Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond (2017) reported that mathematics, science, special education, and language development teachers are more likely to leave their school or the profession than those in other fields. They also reported that turnover rates are 50% higher for teachers in Title I schools, which serve more low-income students. In particular, mathematics and science teacher turnover rates are nearly 70% greater in Title I schools than in non-Title I schools. In addition, the turnover rate for alternatively certified teachers is more than 80% higher.

Rural teachers generally leave because of the working environment, dissatisfaction with administrators, lack of autonomy, the inability to make decisions, a lack of professional development, and a desire for more money (Burton et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Lavalley, 2018; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutchter et al., 2016). Age is also a factor in teacher attrition. The youngest and oldest teachers have the higher attrition rates of all (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Some rural teachers also leave because of living conditions in rural settings, the lack of amenities, and regional isolation (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Burton et al., 2013; Cowen et al., 2012; Rooks, 2018), and the lower salaries and fewer benefits like pensions (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Horsley, 2019).

### *2.6 Strategies for Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention*

Several programs and research focused on recruiting and retaining highly effective educators in rural schools. Most of these require the support and collaboration of regional and state universities and colleges, the school and county school administrators, parents, and other community members (Armstrong et al., 2018; Biddle & Aano, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; LaFloch et al., 2016; New Teacher Center, 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Sutchter et al., 2016).

#### *2.6.1 Recruitment*

The first thing that can help with recruitment is "growing your own" rural teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutchter et al., 2016). These programs target K-12 students to enter the education field and return to their rural communities after graduating from college. Programs like this are coupled with loan forgiveness (Armstrong et al., 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutchter et al., 2016), service

scholarship (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2016), higher salaries and supplemental compensation for hard-to-staff regions and schools (Armstrong et al., 2018; Hughes, 2012; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutchter et al., 2019; Young, 2018), and housing and childcare subsidies (Armstrong et al., 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016; Suther et al., 2016).

One of the first things a teacher-preparation program can do is to familiarize students with what it is like to teach in rural settings, and frequently this is best accomplished with place-based education (Armstrong et al., 2018; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2015). Schulte (2018) researched two one-year residency cohorts from the University of California, Chico — Rural Teacher Residence (RTR) program and the Residency in Secondary Education (RiSE) — that "sought to deliver teacher preparation with research-based features to more successfully recruit and retain teachers in harder to staff contexts" (p. 13). The coursework covers place-based education because that has been found to work well with rural education. Also covered are critical pedagogy of place, social capital in rural places, and public education in rural communities. Rural teacher recruitment can also partner universities with rural schools to help with induction and mentor teachers in their first few years in the profession (Zost, 2010).

### 2.6.2 Retention

Besides above mentioned, many other strategies can increase retention in rural schools. First are better professional development opportunities for teachers, building paraprofessionals, and training principals (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; LaFloch et al., 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016; Young, 2018). Having trained paraprofessionals in the classroom (Armstrong et al., 2018; LeFloch et al., 2016) and better-trained principals to work with (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; LeFloch et al., 2016; Simon & Johnson, 2015) create an improved working environment, which is very important for retention (Hughes, 2012; New Teacher Center, 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016; Sutchter et al., 2019; Young, 2018).

Other improvements to the working environment that assist with retention include shared decision making (Ingersoll, 2012; Podolsky et al., 2016), an accountability system (Podolsky et al., 2016), cohorts and professional collaborations (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Rooks, 2018; Young, 2018), and allowing teachers to move up within the school to become teacher leaders and mentors, for example (Armstrong et al., 2018; New Teacher Center, 2016; Sutchter et al., 2016; Young, 2018). Better facilities and classroom resources (Ingersoll, 2012; New Teacher Center, 2016; Simon & Johnson, 2015) also assist retention.

## 3. Method

This study used the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology. AI is a systematic, holistic, and collaborative methodology that follows a strengths-based model of change to uncover the positive core of an organization (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2020). People from an organization become part of an inquiry process that seeks to find a system's strengths and use those strengths as a platform to create change (Waters & White, 2015). This approach is different from a deficit-based approach to diagnosing problems and errors in an organization

and seeks to create change by fixing these errors.

One of the most common appreciative inquiry approaches is the 4-D cycle, which is anchored in a positive topic of inquiry: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2020). The cycle engages all of an organization's members by systematically asking about strengths, successes, positive stories, resources, and capabilities (Waters & White, 2015). The discovery stage is designed to help members to discover the positive elements that already occur in the organization. Appreciation of the positive in the organization builds confidence for successful future change. The dream stage creates a positive image of the future. The design stage prompts participants to think of ways the dream can come true and take shape. The destiny/deliver stage encourages the organizational members to take personal responsibility for change. Finally, the team discusses cooperative ways to distribute the work to achieve the dream (Cooperrider, 2012).

An appreciative inquiry approach was used in this study to glean insights from the key agents about the rural schools' strengths and effectiveness in hiring or retaining teachers for reform and organizational change. This technique begins with participants discussing successful experiences, identifying the commonalities among those experiences, and creating a plan for the future to make those experiences occur more often while taking into account local culture and social structures (Anderson et al., 2016). AI is a form of action research emphasizing both action and reflection.

### *3.1 Procedures*

This study used a qualitative study design for action analysis and utilized an AI research methodology with participants. These included teachers, principals, superintendents, government officers, and educators who participated in the AI 4-D cycle. At the discovery stage, participants exchanged experiences when they engaged in a high-point encounter. They described when they believed their work and their connection to the environment effectively. Next, participants created powerful images in the Dream stage and envisioned how their organization would appear in the best circumstances, considered a collective dream. Next, participants collectively, collaboratively, and consensually developed a blueprint in the design stage. Lastly, at the Destiny point, participants identify standard core work processes and a social network to apply to their plans.

As a group, the researchers of this study created four open-ended questions. They reviewed them with faculty members and doctoral students to provide feedback on the clarity and validity of questions. Then, the researchers selected fourteen educators who work in rural schools and used local teachers in the recruitment process. The experimental group was composed of rural school district members who were chosen deliberately.

The interview questions that were presented to the school leaders, which set up the key discussion topics, are as follows:

1. As an educational leader, what do you consider some of your best ideas for recruiting and retaining highly effective rural teachers?



2. What are you most proud of in your role to encourage the recruitment of highly effective rural teachers?
3. How technology might play a role in the future?
4. What small, cost-effective changes could we make right now that would encourage better recruitment and retention of highly effective rural teachers?

After the interview, the researchers identified common themes in the group discussion, shared themes with the group, and modified them according to their input for validity. First-hand evidence was collected to ensure "data credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" of the results. At the same time, the face validity of data was assured, and the quality of the data gathering process was determined (Calabrese et al., 2010, p. 255).

The researchers compiled data from multiple sources to triangulate it and maintained a detailed description of the data collection process. Consistent AI protocols were implemented throughout the AI 4-D process to mitigate errors and bias. Moreover, data were analyzed using text analysis, matching patterns, and content analysis.

This qualitative research focused on fourteen interviewees who had leadership roles in rural Kentucky schools. To learn more about strategies, a purposive technique was used. Black (2010) defines the purposive sampling method that allows the researcher a choice of elements selected for the sample. Before beginning the study, the researchers extensively reviewed the literature to create four open-ended discussion questions designed to guide the interviewees. After the interviews, the researchers came together to share their findings. They identified common themes to brainstorm possible solutions that rural schools can implement to increase the recruitment and retention of quality teachers.

#### **4. Findings**

To assess the state of teacher recruitment and retention, identifying leaders' perspectives in the education field was essential. Therefore, the researchers developed a series of questions for principals who reside in Kentucky's eastern and rural areas. The principals interviewed workers in various settings ranging from elementary to high school. Awareness of diverse educational environments enables researchers to understand the strategies required to recruit highly effective teachers in rural areas.

##### *4.1 Best Ideas to Recruit and Retain Highly Effective Rural Teachers*

Participants agreed that creating a positive school climate, mentoring new teachers, and recognizing a teacher's successes would go a long way in recruiting and retaining rural educators. There is significant value in creating a positive school culture for student development and success (Seider, 2012). Subsequently, a community where students thrive socially and academically positions a school as an attractive option for prospective educators seeking employment. In the long term, in an environment where students enjoy their education, the recognition of an educator's hard work transcends a school's ability to retain teachers

(Kirkpatrick & Johnson, 2014).

Dahlkamp et al. (2017) conducted a multi-level analysis of *Principal Self-Efficacy, School Climate, and Teacher Retention*. The findings determined that when a school's climate is "vulnerable," they are more likely to experience higher turnover. The deductions drawn from the study confirm that regardless of the geographic location of a school, recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers are highly correlated to school climate. While the school climate can impact educators' career aspirations, technology also revolutionizes hiring and retention in rural schools.

#### *4.2 The Impact of Technology on Teacher Recruitment and Retention*

One of the principals interviewed emphasized that the hiring process was manual before arriving. When jobs were posted, potential applicants had to report to the board or district office, pick up a paper application, and return their application materials for review. This seasoned principal noticed fierce competition for teachers from neighboring counties and instituted an online application process. Technology allowed him to streamline the application and review process for prospective candidates. This move expedited his follow-up with great candidates. It is the approach superintendents and human resources departments must adopt to recruit highly effective teachers in rural areas. Abrams (2018) also strongly advises educators to rethink their hiring process, train millennials, and keep them engaged. Millennials are to be taken more seriously because technology has been at the center of their entire lives (Abrams, 2018).

With the advancement of technology, teachers are better equipped to create effective and dynamic instruction. This is particularly important since the current generation of students is significantly tech-savvy. The group also recommended that teachers need assurance from the administration that the technology is in place to address email accounts, prepare lessons, grade assignments effectively, and communicate with parents. The adaptation of technology transcends cost-effective tactics to recruit effective teachers, which will be examined in the following.

#### *4.3 Cost-Effective Measures to Recruit and Retain Highly Effective Teachers*

A brief insight on mentorship was provided in the first section of the discussion, but it parallels the idea of effective recruiting. Technology can streamline educators' recruitment and retention and potentially improve student success (Connor, 2019). However, administrators still must wrestle with developing a pipeline of teachers in an era of budget reduction. There is no doubt that despite these challenges, one cannot compromise on the investment of great staff or exploring new philosophies about staff recruitment. One educator suggested the concept of "Mentor your own." This means teaching faculty would intentionally work with their students and guide them to become educators.

There was consensus among those interviewed that rural schools need to "Grow Your Own" (GYO) replacement teachers. South Carolina has a long history of participating in GYO initiatives to alleviate its teacher shortage, mainly in the need to deploy educators in its many rural areas (Coffey, 2017). Recently, amid a significant teacher shortage, the Kentucky



Department of Education strongly considered using alternative certification programs. While this move may offer a quick resolution to an ailing education system, there are flaws in such a policy that can harm students for years and decades to come.

## 5. Conclusions

The themes that were identified in this research study include the following:

### *5.1 Create a Positive School Climate*

Dahlkamp and colleagues' (2017) study revealed that it was imperative for school districts, principals, and human resources departments to invest resources in creating effective school environments. The study confirms that regardless of the geographic location of a school, recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers are highly correlated to school climate. While the school climate can impact educator career aspirations, technology also revolutionizes hiring and retention in rural schools. Culture can be difficult to change. Other countries place a high value on the teaching profession. One immediate way the culture needs to change is to establish a high value on teachers. A sabbatical is necessary to let teachers refresh and come back with new teaching ideas, reducing burnout and high turnover rates.

### *5.2 Use Technology as a Cost-Effective Tool to Recruit*

Another strategy that is used for recruiting is being fiscally responsible. Rural schools cannot compete with the outside salary of other areas; consequently, rural schools must be more creative when offering positions to new employees. Some schools use technology as a cost-effective tool to recruit. Social media tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter were used to post jobs. Another cost-effective change that rural schools implemented was the usage of online classes. Online classes allow schools to teach everywhere and not have to be physically present. Technology can also offer a more cost-effective means for professional development opportunities that incentivize educators to stay.

### *5.3 Grow Your Own Rural Teachers by Mentoring Promising High School Students*

There are many ways to recruit teachers in rural areas effectively. First, initiate a mentoring program that allows new hires to have someone they know to teach them the ropes. One of the ways discussed is the idea to "grow your own." The concept of "grow your own" means preparing students in the area to become future teachers. This strategy proves effective because of the student's familiarity with the community and the institution. It also helps students be trained more effectively and equips them explicitly for jobs in the future. Along with this trend of growing your own, professionals in the field need to go on-site to immerse themselves in the area and give experiences to those interested in education.

Further research needs to explore P-20 partnership to prepare rural teachers and consider educators who are not classically trained but have knowledge in the field. An example of this might be a person with a college degree in the field having the opportunity to teach in a classroom setting. Typically, a Master of Arts and Teaching (MAT) program is the path taken

by those interested in the teaching field. In addition, schools need to find more progressive educators to serve as models to envision what needs to be done for the future at their current school. Although much more research needs to be done, rural areas need competent educators to help improve the commonwealth and the entire state. Also, the AI approach should be implemented in longitudinal research. Another type of research that needs to be done is a comparative analysis of rural and urban areas.

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