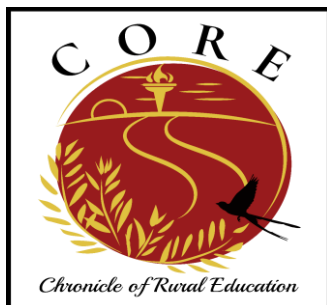




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Beyond the Shortage: Innovative Approaches to Supporting and Sustaining Rural Teachers

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This qualitative study aimed to provide an understanding of the issues involved in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers faced by school Superintendents in rural Texas. Utilizing a qualitative, naturalistic inquiry, the study delved into the personal narratives and professional experiences of rural Superintendents to offer a comprehensive understanding of the issues of teacher recruitment and retention with limited resources and geographical constraints. The findings from this study will not only contribute valuable insights to the field of educational administration but also offer practical recommendations for informing policy decisions and enhancing support systems for Superintendents working in rural schools.

Introduction

Public education in America is a complex and vast system, encompassing many aspects and geographical locales of school districts. Nationwide, rural areas encompass most of our country's landmass, providing a home to a significant portion of the population, including one-fifth of students (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). According to Showalter et al. (2019), throughout the United States, the median student population in school districts classified as rural is less than 500 students. In order to guarantee that rural kids have equal access to high-quality education and are prepared to prosper in a world that is changing quickly, we must give top priority to meeting their unique requirements (Gallo & Beckman, 2016; Hartman et al., 2022).

A shortage of teachers is an ongoing problem, especially in rural school districts (Hartman et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). Teacher shortages in rural school districts affect many subjects and specialty areas including STEM, bi-lingual (LEP), and special education (Ruppar et al., 2024; Sutchter et al., 2019). According to the Texas Education Agency (2017), rural school districts across the state are not immune to this phenomenon, as they face these same challenges. By analyzing the qualitative data, this study may provide rural Texas Superintendents with informative, practical information to assist in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers within their school districts.

Research on rural schooling is sometimes misunderstood by educational researchers, as rural schools possess unique characteristics that set them apart from urban and suburban educational settings (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Showalter et al. (2023) contend that broad research and reform approaches are ineffectual and transient when applied to rural schools because they frequently fail to address the particular issues and circumstances these schools encounter. According to Yamashiro et al. (2022), many issues facing rural public schools in the US are just as severe and challenging to address as those facing urban and city public schools. This study may contribute to the overall field of educational research by generating informative empirical data for addressing disparities in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers in rural schools.

Literature Review

Rural Communities

A considerable number of people inhabit rural areas in the United States which are also home to a substantial proportion of students (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). The term rural carries with it a sense of positive intrinsic value, as opposed to being merely descriptive. It is of great importance that we prioritize strengths and address the unique needs of students residing in rural communities (Hartman et al., 2023; Showalter et al., 2019). By recognizing and building on these strengths, rural education systems are capable of developing innovative models of schooling that are attuned to the specific needs and values of their local communities (Thiel et al., 2021).

Rural communities do not only exist geographically but actually encompass a cultural framework offering alternative aesthetic value that cannot be replicated in urban society, their beautiful scenery, serene environments, and close-knit communities (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Skyhar, 2015; Texas Education Agency, 2017). While some may argue that rural communities lack certain amenities or opportunities available in cities and suburban communities, overall, the benefits of living in a rural community outweigh the negatives (Seelig & McCabe, 2019; Thiel et al., 2021).

According to Greenough & Nelson (2015), by framing rural in this way, this perspective challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about rural regions, but rather, celebrates the contributions and richness found within rural communities. By understanding the specificities and characteristics of rural communities, and responding to the needs of these communities, quality education services can be offered (Gallo & Beckman, 2016; Skyhar, 2020). Rural schools also tend to be smaller, offering a more personalized learning environment and experience (Miller 2020; Tran et al., 2020). This environment can promote a friendly and inclusive atmosphere whereby students feel valued

and connected, and there is more cooperation and camaraderie within the school community (Hartman et al., 2023; Leech et al., 2022).

Issues in Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Hiring quality teachers is helpful in maintaining high levels of accountability and can assure students of the best possible education (Rosenblatt et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many obstacles and challenges exist that inhibit this from occurring (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Factors such as low salaries, heavy workloads, lack of professional development opportunities, and difficult working conditions can contribute to high turnover rates among teachers (Geiger & Pivoparova, 2018; Seelig & McCabe, 2021; Sutchter et al., 2019).

Building social networks can be a challenging endeavor for inexperienced teachers in locations with sparse concentrations of young individuals (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Shuls and Flores (2020) found that the experience of loneliness among teachers and an unfavorable work-life equilibrium may result in teacher attrition. Urban and suburban areas offer a diverse range of experiences such as museums, theaters, concert halls, fine dining restaurants, nightlife venues, and highly accessible shopping malls, whereas rural areas might not (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; McArdle, 2019).

Salaries and Benefits

In Texas, the state legislature is responsible for setting the base pay scale for educators. It appears that rural school districts tend to gravitate to the lower end of the scale, whereas urban and suburban school districts tend to pay considerably more (McArdle, 2019; Miller, 2020; Texas Education Agency, 2017). Showalter et al. (2019) reported a discrepancy in per-pupil funding between urban/suburban and rural schools. This discrepancy is largely due to the limited tax base in rural communities, which affects the overall budget available for teacher salaries (Lazarev et al., 2017). As a result, teachers in these districts often must make do with smaller paychecks and resources (Leech et al., 2022). This can lead to these teachers having to spend their own money on classroom supplies and materials (Poldarsky et al., 2019).

Leadership Support

Rural teachers are prone to job dissatisfaction due to inadequate supportive leadership and appreciation for their work (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Leech et al., 2022). Teachers are more likely to stay at school and have education as their profession if school leaders establish effective communication lines with them. (Miller, 2020; Poldarsky et al., 2019). When evaluating the reasons behind a teacher's decision to join a specific school district, it is crucial for Superintendents to carefully assess the effects of administrative support (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Job dissatisfaction can arise when employees feel a lack of support and recognition from their leaders (Rosenblatt et al., 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). Rather than resorting to authoritarian measures, cultivating a culture of trust and support can be accomplished by open communication and transparency (Shuls & Flores, 2019).

Professional Development

Rural teachers may develop new skills, update their knowledge, or obtain higher qualifications to enhance the quality of instruction through professional development (Miller, 2020; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Almost all states mandate some level of professional development and continuing education for teachers. Rural schools face significant challenges in providing effective professional development opportunities (Inouye et al., 2023; Skyhar, 2020). Unfortunately, universities, colleges, and these other avenues for advanced education and professional development are not always readily accessible to educators in rural schools (Shuls & Flores, 2019). As such, often teachers in rural schools must rely on colleagues in their schools for professional development and continuing education (Skyhar, 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this naturalistic study was to explore how Superintendents at rural school districts throughout Texas respond to the challenges of recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. Constructivist Grounded Theory was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study, as it explores how individuals associate meanings, beliefs, and experiences in context to the phenomena being studied (Devajit & Haradhan, 2022). This study employed a qualitative research design to contribute to the empirical literature on the phenomenon, specifically utilizing a naturalistic inquiry approach to deeply illustrate the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The following questions guided the study:

RQ1. Have you experienced any challenges in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers in your role as Superintendent in rural districts?

RQ2. What strategies have you employed as a Superintendent to recruit and retain high quality teachers in rural districts?

The Setting

There are more than 1,000 independent school districts in Texas, 500 of which are classified as rural. Three hundred of these 500 designated rural school districts have fewer than 900 students in total. Ten Texas rural school districts with a combined student population of 200–1000 PreK–12 students served as the research sites. The researchers were able to obtain a thorough grasp of the particular requirements of rural schools by concentrating on these communities to offer insightful information about the educational opportunities and difficulties rural districts in these underprivileged communities encounter.

The Participants

Participants in this study were 10 current school Superintendents of rural school districts located throughout Texas. The sample criteria established were participants with at least two years of experience as a Superintendent, currently serving as a Superintendent in a rural district, and holding a valid Superintendent certificate. A smaller sample size of participants was selected to provide an in-depth exploration of the findings. The sampling method employed to select participants was purposeful convenience sampling. According to Creswell & Guetterman (2019), a purposeful sampling strategy is homogeneous sampling because the participants are all

members of a subgroup. For this study, it was assumed that the Superintendents interviewed were forthcoming, objective, and truthful in their responses. On average, our respondents have served as Superintendents for 13 years and have worked in 4 different school districts. The average number of students in these districts is 363.

Data Collection

After IRB approval by Lamar University was granted, participant recruitment/consent letters were mailed out. After obtaining consent from superintendents to join the study, the researchers arranged individual interviews. These interviews took place either face-to-face or through online platforms. Throughout the recruitment process, confidentiality and ethical considerations were paramount to ensure that the participant felt comfortable and informed throughout their involvement in the research. To protect privacy, each participant was given a pseudonym.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used. The use of a semi-structured interview protocol enabled the interviewer to ask probing questions, allowing the participant to thoroughly examine their own experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). During the interviews, researchers took written notes for later transcription. To ensure integrity, data were gathered, transcribed, coded, maintained, secured, and accessed only by the researcher. Data will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the office of the researcher for no less than three years.

Data Analysis

For the formal coding process, thematic analysis was employed as the qualitative research method. According to Burns et al. (2022), thematic analysis could fill in any gaps in the literature. This entailed finding recurring themes or patterns in a dataset to learn more about a specific phenomenon. Researchers can gain deep, nuanced insights into how people interpret events, make sense of their reality, and deal with difficulties by examining and classifying themes that surface from the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The concepts and topics that surfaced during the interview process and the literature review were used to create coding categories. Because it enables researchers to thoroughly examine the subjective elements of people's experiences, this method works best for answering research questions pertaining to people's experiences or perceptions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) noted that researchers must maintain objectivity and impartiality during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Accordingly, the researchers adhered to established methodological procedures to ensure the data accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives, thereby mitigating their potential biases or preconceptions.

Findings

Findings for Research Question 1

Research question one focused on the perceived challenges of recruiting high-quality teachers in rural districts in southeast Texas rural schools. Frequent teacher turnover can cause instability, disrupting the learning processes. This instability can also lead to inconsistent teaching methods, a lack of continuity in curriculum delivery, and difficulty building strong relationships between

teachers and students. It can also result in a loss of institutional knowledge and experience, as new teachers may not be familiar with the school's policies, procedures, and culture. Furthermore, frequent teacher turnover can impact student morale and engagement, as students may struggle to adjust to new teachers and routines. This can lead to decreased academic performance, increased behavioral issues, and overall dissatisfaction with the learning environment.

Superintendent 4, "Maintaining a stable and consistent teaching staff is essential for fostering positive relationships in the classroom. When a teacher departs, students may face challenges in adapting to a new instructor."

Superintendent 1 observed, "Certain teachers do not live in the rural areas where they are employed; instead, they travel from larger communities. They tend to vacate rural teaching roles as soon as opportunities arise in larger districts that are nearer to their homes."

Rural schools should also focus on implementing effective mentorship programs for new teachers, promoting collaboration among educators, and recognizing and rewarding outstanding performance. By valuing and supporting their educators, schools can cultivate a culture of excellence that benefits both teachers and students alike. Ultimately, prioritizing the recruitment and retention of high-quality educators is essential for ensuring the success and growth of our education system as a whole. By investing in their teachers and promoting stability within the teaching staff, schools can create a more positive learning environment for students and ultimately improve educational outcomes.

Superintendent 8 remarked, "The provision of a sufficient salary and benefits package significantly restricts rural public school superintendents in their efforts to attract and retain teachers, especially in areas of critical need."

Superintendent 1 stated, "The state is neglecting rural school districts; we require improved funding and resources from the state. Even with the TIA allotment, we are unable to compete with larger districts."

Educators often view rural public school districts as a pathway into the teaching profession and a venue for training. In certain instances, teachers who are certified in areas deemed "hard to find" may choose to pursue positions outside the educational sector, particularly in the fields of science and mathematics. Data collected by the researchers indicated that a significant number of rural public school districts in Texas offer salaries that are at or just above the state-mandated minimum for teachers. Furthermore, most of the larger public schools tend to provide compensation that significantly exceeds the state minimum teacher salary, along with additional stipends and incentives.

Superintendent 5 noted, "Rural public school districts face challenges in competing in the 'bidding' wars with larger public school districts, particularly during job fairs and other recruitment events."

In certain cases, educators in rural school districts find themselves teaching beyond their certification scope or across multiple campuses. This observation was made by several superintendents during interviews.

Superintendent 6 noted, "Out of my total teaching staff of 20, 4 are not fully certified, 2 are not teaching in their certification area; and we experience a nearly 50% yearly turnover rate."

Superintendents 3, 5 and 10 indicated that they have teachers in special education and bilingual programs who rotate among their elementary, middle, and high schools. Another superintendent mentioned, "He has several content area teachers who instruct multiple grade levels, along with one physical education teacher responsible for all grade levels."

A significant observation was that numerous districts feature husband and wife teaching teams, along with superintendents and principals whose spouses also teach at the same school.

Superintendent 10 noted, "I have teachers whose spouses are on the school board, which can create challenges for some of my other teachers."

Superintendent 7 remarked, "In my district, most teachers were either born and raised in the community or have a spouse or family members living in the area, which is why they choose to teach in my district."

These connections can result in teachers who are new to the community or not originally from it feeling isolated and vulnerable, potentially leading them to leave the district.

Superintendent 7 also mentioned, "To attract other teachers to my district, I must identify reasons beyond financial incentives; often, the appeal of a 'lifelong' job is my strongest selling point." Additionally, he expressed, "What can I offer to a young person just out of college, relocating to a small town with limited social activities or opportunities?"

The availability of training and staff development, as well as opportunities for continuing education, poses a challenge for new teachers. Frequently, it is the new teachers who require these professional development activities. Funding and supporting the professional development of new educators is crucial for cultivating a skilled workforce, which ultimately benefits students and the school community. Schools dedicate significant time and resources to training new teachers. When these individuals depart, the investments made in their development are essentially squandered, resulting in a cycle of recruitment and training that is both expensive and ineffective. However, when these educators leave shortly after their training, it signifies a considerable loss for schools and districts.

Superintendent 3 observed, "Without a supportive and collaborative work environment, professional development opportunities, and a strong sense of community, teachers will not feel valued or connected and leave the district."

Findings for Research Question 2

Adequate and affordable housing for educators is yet another issue highlighted by the superintendents. Several superintendents observed that providing incentives such as signing bonuses, relocation assistance, or housing support for new teachers can effectively draw educators to their district. Some districts either provide housing allowances or own properties that they rent to teachers at a minimal cost.

Superintendent 1 mentioned that his district possesses 13 houses that are leased to teachers, along with reduced electrical rates, in an effort to ensure a very low cost of living.

Superintendent 8 remarked, "Due to the variations in pay scales among school districts, rural public school districts must seek alternative intrinsic motivators to attract teachers."

Generally, rural public schools feature small class sizes, allowing teachers to develop personal relationships with both students and their families. It is common for teachers to be relatives of the students they instruct. Additionally, it is not uncommon for secondary and elementary students to interact in shared spaces.

Superintendent 6 perhaps articulated this sentiment best, stating, "In general, rural public school districts resemble private or parochial schools in that the teachers, staff members, parents, and community members exert additional effort and demonstrate remarkable dedication to their school – they go above and beyond to ensure that their children receive the highest quality education by doing whatever is necessary."

Highlighting the importance of small class sizes, community values, and a nurturing environment can effectively persuade potential teachers to explore career opportunities in smaller districts. Schools that encourage faculty participation are more inclined to foster a culture and climate that supports teacher retention.

Superintendent 4 remarked, "By effectively marketing the unique advantages of teaching in small towns, school districts can attract dedicated educators who are seeking a more fulfilling and manageable teaching experience...With the right strategies and resources, small-town schools can become desirable destination for educators looking to make a difference.

Superintendent 1 noted, "Regularly soliciting feedback from teachers about their experiences can help identify areas for improvement and give them a sense of

ownership in their school and community.”

Rural communities strive to create a distinct identity. The local school frequently acts as the central hub for much of the community. Signs and banners welcome visitors along main streets, showcasing the achievements of the school’s athletic teams and extracurricular organizations. Water towers proudly display the name of the school mascot. Other strategies suggested by superintendents to recruit and retain teachers included:

- Emphasize the advantages of smaller class sizes, which enable more individualized attention and foster stronger connections between educators and students. This can lead to enhanced teaching and improved student performance.
- Highlight that smaller and rural schools typically face fewer disciplinary issues, allowing teachers to focus more on instruction rather than behavior management. This can contribute to a more productive and successful classroom atmosphere.
- Advocate for the values of small and rural communities by illustrating the strong sense of belonging found in small towns, where teachers can become vital community members, engage in local events, and cultivate enduring relationships with families and students.
- Promote the lifestyle advantages of residing in a small town, including a lower cost of living, reduced traffic, a more relaxed pace of life, and the availability of recreational activities, local culture, and the overall quality of life that small towns provide.
- Share testimonials from teachers who have moved from larger districts to small-town schools. Emphasize their motivations for the transition and the positive experiences they have encountered since becoming part of the community, as well as offering mentorship programs to assist new educators in adapting to their roles and the community.

Conclusions

Teachers face numerous challenges in the classroom, from managing diverse student needs to dealing with administrative tasks and meeting rigorous academic standards. One way to address the issue of teacher retention is by increasing salaries to make the profession more attractive and competitive. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the minds of future generations, yet many are underpaid and undervalued for their hard work and dedication. By offering competitive salaries, we can attract and retain high-quality educators who are passionate about teaching and committed to making a difference in students' lives. In addition to addressing compensation, creating supportive environments for teachers is essential for retaining them in the profession.

Providing teachers with resources, professional development opportunities, and mentorship programs can help them feel supported and empowered to succeed in their roles. Furthermore, valuing the contributions of educators is crucial for boosting teacher morale and job satisfaction.

Recognizing teachers for their hard work, dedication, and impact on students' lives can go a long way in fostering a positive school culture and encouraging teachers to remain with the district.

Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural schools is a pressing issue that requires innovative and creative solutions. By taking a proactive and creative approach, valuing educators, and creating supportive environments, rural schools can ensure they have the high-quality teachers needed to provide an excellent education for their students. The research collected from this study may serve as a foundation for evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at addressing high-quality teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools.

High-quality educators are essential in shaping the future of our society by educating and empowering the upcoming generation. Nevertheless, numerous teachers encounter financial difficulties due to inadequate salaries. Fair compensation not only signifies the value of the teaching profession but also has the potential to attract exceptional talent, enhance morale, and cultivate a more stable teaching workforce. Therefore, rural schools should prioritize just and equitable compensation and benefits for educators, as this directly influences teacher recruitment and retention, job satisfaction, and ultimately, student achievement. Finally, rural superintendents need to establish professional development opportunities that foster a culture of excellence, where teachers receive support and encouragement to thrive in their positions. By addressing these issues, schools can develop a more stable teaching workforce and, in turn, improve student outcomes.

Through naturalistic interviews with rural Superintendents, and thematic analysis of those interviews, the findings of this study could have the potential to provide practical recommendations and solutions. Ultimately, this research catalyzes positive change and innovation within the field of rural education. The findings underscore the necessity for rural school districts to focus resources on strategies that attract and maintain quality teaching staff. School districts must think outside the box and implement strategies that incentivize teachers to be attracted to teaching and then stay in rural schools. This could include offering competitive salaries, providing mentorship programs, creating virtual professional development opportunities, offering loan forgiveness programs for educators who commit to staying in rural areas long-term, or implementing flexible scheduling options to improve work-life balance.

Recommendations for Further Study

Expanding the study to include other geographic locales that could enhance the generalizability of the findings. By examining the topic in different contexts, researchers can assess the extent to which their results hold across diverse settings. This can increase the relevance and applicability of the study's conclusions, making them more valuable to a wider audience and potentially informing policy decisions or practical applications in various regions.

Addition of a quantitative piece to enhance the generalizability of the findings. By incorporating a quantitative component, researchers can collect data from a larger sample size, increasing the external validity of the study. This would also allow for the identification of patterns and trends

that can be applied to a broader context, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Incorporating campus-level administrator and teacher interviews into this study could allow for a deeper exploration of the factors that contribute to the overall success or shortcomings in teacher recruitment and retention. Through these interviews, researchers can uncover valuable insights and perspectives into this issue, strategies, and professional development opportunities provided to educators.

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