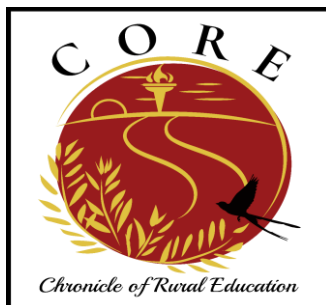




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Efficacy in the Recruitment and Retention of Pre-Service Teachers in Rural Areas

Doug Feldman

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The shortage of educators in rural public schools across the United States is a persistent challenge, often exacerbated by high turnover rates and difficulties in recruitment. This exploratory study investigated successful strategies for teacher recruitment and retention in six rural school districts across Missouri and Illinois, selected for their ability to maintain full staffing and low attrition rates (10% or less). Utilizing a qualitative approach involving document review, personal contacts, and site observations, the researcher identified several key themes contributing to these districts' success: targeted recruitment programs, the development of partnerships with alternative certification programs, the implementation of robust mentorship initiatives, and proactive community engagement. The findings suggest that while geographic isolation and resource limitations remain significant barriers, districts that cultivate local pipelines, invest in long-term mentorship, and foster strong community-school relationships can successfully mitigate teacher shortages. The study concludes with recommendations for applying these strategies to agrarian school districts in Kentucky and highlights the need for further research into the long-term impact of these initiatives on student achievement and the role of policy interventions.

Introduction

The contemporary shortage of teachers in public schools in the United States has been well documented (U.S. Department of Education, 2025; Bryner, 2021; Ingersoll, et al., 2021; Lavalley, 2018; Roberts, 2021). Moreover, the frequent turnover of educators which school districts are

able to initially hire can subsequently have a negative impact on the student populations being served (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). While this dilemma is certainly problematic for schools in urban and suburban areas, it is even more acute in many rural systems. Due to low salaries, limited social and cultural opportunities, and other factors, rural schools often experience exceptional difficulty in attracting and then retaining teachers for extended periods of time, with individuals leaving after a short period of time for higher remuneration in more populous areas (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Morris, 2019; Reagan et al., 2019; Tran & Smith, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Lowe, 2006; McClure & Reeves, 2004).

This challenging phenomenon is common in the state of Kentucky, where the researcher works as a university professor of teacher education. However, through careful examination, professional contacts, and pedagogical experiences, the researcher discovered particular rural school districts in the neighboring states of Missouri and Illinois – those with demographics and economic frameworks strikingly similar to districts in Kentucky – that have been enjoying significant success in recent years in the recruitment of teachers as well as their retention for significant lengths of time. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to more deeply investigate the successful operations of school, community, and county-level strategies in these Missouri and Illinois districts related to rural educator recruitment and retention, which can hopefully lead to the application of such strategies in similar agrarian districts in Kentucky. For the purposes of this study, “rural” is defined as “places with fewer than 5,000 people and 2,000 housing units” (USDA, 2026).

The objectives of this exploratory study were as follows:

- To identify the extent of teacher shortage in rural schools across the United States;
- To explore the reasons contributing to teacher shortages in rural areas;
- To assess the impact of teacher shortage on students' academic outcomes and overall educational environment;
- To analyze existing policies and initiatives aimed at alleviating teacher shortage in rural schools;
- To propose recommendations and strategies for mitigating teacher shortage and improving educational outcomes in rural areas in the state of Kentucky from similar, neighboring districts who have experienced success in this area.

Review of Relevant Literature

Recent scholarship in the area of teacher recruitment and attrition has clearly illustrated a critical level of turnover taking place in public schools in the United States, with rural areas being among the sectors most severely impacted (Castro & Esposito, 2022). To fill educator shortages, rural districts often turn to fragile and temporary practices such as inserting emergency-credentialed employees into the classroom or accepting any certified applicants – regardless of quality – who inquire about open positions (Brenner-et al., 2021). These remedies, while occasionally being successful, typically result in minimal success for these newly-hired teachers in the short term, in addition to low retention rates for the given school in the long term. Moreover, the results of multiple studies contend that the simple geographic realities of rural schools and communities create an embedded educational inequity which is unfortunately perpetuated over generations

(Tran, et al., 2023; Rural Schools Collaborative; 2021; Biddle, et al., 2019; Tieken, 2017; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014; Hughes, 2012).

Nonetheless, there have been recent instances across the country (some anecdotal, while others more systemic) in which rural school districts have enjoyed a measure of entrenched success in shaping their institutions into places where educators generally seek to remain for long periods of time. Among the more common of these having met with encouraging results include those districts with features such as innovative and contextualized use of technology, progressive and detailed mentoring programs for beginning teachers as well as those new to rural areas (with some such programs lasting as long as three years), collaboration between school districts and teacher education programs, and creative financial incentives among other attractive components (Lux et al. 2022; Seelig & McCabe, 2021; Kartal et al., 2017; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Beesley, et al., 2008; Gruenewald, 2003). Similarly, Ulferts (2016) highlighted the importance of community support, administrative leadership, and innovative strategies in addressing these challenges to ensure the quality of education in rural areas while Maranto et al. (2018) examined the factors of limited resources and geographic isolation in rural communities influencing teacher hiring and retention.

Yet, to understand this problem comprehensively, it is perhaps necessary to look at even deeper socio-economic and curricular factors which surround such communities. Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) explored the importance of incorporating rural-specific content and experiences into teacher education programs to better prepare teachers for rural settings by identifying key lessons that emerging teachers should learn to be successful in rural environments, such as understanding the rural context, building relationships with students and community members, adapting instructional practices to meet diverse student needs, and advocating for rural schools. Their study emphasizes the importance of intentional efforts to incorporate rural perspectives and experiences into teacher preparation curricula to enhance the quality of education in rural areas and improve teacher retention rates. In a like manner, Brenner et al. (2021) also stress the notion of cultivating a prescribed, locally-focused curriculum teachers new to rural systems to strengthen their comfort in their new jobs.

In yet another lens toward solutions to this problem, Malloy and Allen (2007) studied educator retention within a rural school district that focuses on building teacher resilience as they identified factors contributing to teacher satisfaction and longevity in a particular rural setting. Through interviews and observations, they concluded that key components of the school's resilience-building approach included strong leadership, supportive colleagues, and a positive school climate, as well as the significance of professional development opportunities and teacher empowerment in promoting teacher retention.

Additionally, several scholars (McCabe 2021; Vaughn & Saul, 2018; Eppley, 2015; Berry, 2012; Huysman, 2008) presented studies that focused on rural teacher retention, aiming to reshape the narrative surrounding why teachers choose to leave from, as well as stay in, rural areas by highlighting rewarding aspects of employment that motivate teachers to stay. These authors identified key themes that contribute to educators' decisions to remain including personal

fulfillment, feeling a sense of community, professional growth opportunities, supportive school environments, and the ability to make palpable positive impact on students' lives. These studies suggest that by recognizing and promoting the unique positive aspects of rural teaching, policymakers and school leaders can better support teacher retention efforts in rural areas and build school staffs on these strengths.

Those involved in teacher education are viewed as having a significant role to play within this issue as well. Blanks et al. (2013) discussed the significance of rural schools in pre-service teacher preparation. Colleges and schools of education are encouraged by the authors to highlight the unique learning opportunities and experiences that rural schools can offer, particularly opportunities related to authentic and kinesthetic hands-on learning. They argue that rural schools can play a crucial role in shaping the skills and perspectives of all future educators – including those seeking to work in urban and suburban areas – and preparing them to be adaptable, resourceful, and culturally responsive in their teaching practices wherever they professionally land. To be certain, any system of schools – urban, suburban, or rural – can be stronger when an ability to work together is fostered.

Also of importance in the general strengthening of agrarian schools is the ability for such districts to work cooperatively. Hargreaves et al. (2015) investigated the design and implementation of rural school improvement networks, examining both the intended goals and the actual outcomes of these initiatives. They deduced that the inclination of school leaders and community stakeholders to collaborate beyond their district and county borders educational opportunities can be better supported in rural areas.

In summary, the existing, relevant literature regarding difficulties in the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas can be identified in part as:

- Geographic isolation and limited access to amenities;
- Lower salaries and fewer career advancement opportunities;
- Negative perceptions of rural life and professional isolation; and
- Higher rates of teacher turnover compared to urban schools

This preceding examination set the basis for the exploratory study undertaken by the researcher and provided a strong framework for the data collected and analyzed.

Methods

In late 2024 and early 2025, the researcher traveled to six rural school districts in Missouri and Illinois. Through the researcher's triangulation of document review, personal contacts, and observations, these districts had been identified to be utilizing successful practices within the previous two years toward the recruitment and retention of teachers in agrarian settings. For purposes of this study, "Successful practices of teacher recruitment and retention for agrarian settings" is defined as having all full-time faculty positions filled and an attrition rate of full-time educators of 10% or less per academic year. The researcher spent a full day (and in some cases, two full days) at the central office of each district, speaking with administrators regarding their general and specific strategies and experiences regarding their success with attracting and retaining their teaching staffs. Additionally, at the end of each visit, the researcher shared

recruitment literature from his university with each of the six school districts, in an effort to establish an employment “pipeline” between them and the researcher’s institution. Upon completion of all the visits, the researcher compiled his findings into identifiable themes to be translated into success for similar districts in his home region of Kentucky.

Findings

Several significant themes related to teacher recruitment and retention were extracted from the six rural school districts Missouri and Illinois which were selected for the study. The implementation of these strategies has resulted in a dramatic increase in teacher retention for these districts over the past two years in comparison with their local and national institutional peers. While not every district utilized all of the strategies listed below, the vast majority of the districts employed some or all of them.

Targeted Recruitment Programs

Five of the six districted noted having experienced success in targeting teacher education programs and career fairs which showed a specific amenability for opportunities in rural schools, as suggested by White and Kline (2018). These programs and career fairs were typically offered by small colleges in isolated locations – such as the setting of most rural school districts themselves – where the students demonstrated a likelihood of returning their small hometowns (or those of similar characteristics) upon graduation. When representative of the districts attended these career fairs and spoke with staff members at the teacher educating institutions, several of them made note of available incentives for the placement of teachers in their districts such as possible student loan forgiveness, as well as assistance in the securing of housing, and with relocation costs.

Alternative Certification Programs

In addition to cultivating relationships with nearby teacher-educating institution for the recruitment of traditional undergraduates, all six of the successful districts noted the building of partnerships with alternative certification programs at those institutions to recruit professionals from other fields into teaching and para-professional roles (such as Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) programs, in which teacher certification and a master’s degree can be earned simultaneously by post-baccalaureate candidates). In each case, the districts had preparations in place to host the alternative candidates for pre-service field experience hours, leading in many cases to a seamless transition from familiarity with the schools and communities into paid teaching positions.

Professional Development Opportunities

All six of the examined districts showed an ability to offer initial and on-going professional development opportunities for its educators tailored to the needs of rural educators, including training in the integration of technology integration culturally-responsive teaching practices; but perhaps the most prominent and important aspect of this theme was the demonstration by each district to implement a mentorship program for new teachers, in which a beginning educator was officially paired with an experienced one for in-depth guidance in the curriculum and milieu of the school. Several administrators from among the districts noted that such programs were

particularly critical for novice teachers who were new to rural school environments, toward assisting with their adjustment to the locale.

Community Engagement and Partnerships

While limited in its use across the six districts examined, success was noted by two of the school systems by engaging prominent local businesses to sponsor potential teaching candidates with scholarships and other forms of support. In developing a relationship with these pre-service teachers, it was evident that these businesses could effectively highlight the unique benefits of teaching in rural areas and in their communities specifically. Moreover, teacher candidates are more strongly encouraged to arrive and stay at a rural school if they are under the impression that their school administrators are vested in their communities, and show a commitment to stay for the long-term themselves as well (Wood et al., 2018).

Discussion

While not utilized by any of the districts explicitly, the following other successful strategies are offered by the researcher as a result of his general examination of this issue.

Rural Teacher Residency Programs

None of the visited districts mentioned having utilized long-term residential programs that provide intensive, hands-on training for prospective teachers in rural communities, which has been shown to lead to increased retention rates for educators in agrarian areas (Valente et al., 2022; Mollenkopf, 2009). Examples of such programs include the Rural Teacher Residency Program in Appalachia, as well as the Mississippi Teacher Corps in the Mississippi River Delta region.

Collaborative Recruitment Efforts

One aspect of the research that emerged as potentially negative was a certain degree of provinciality noted by the researcher on the part of most of the districts examined herein. In both implied and explicit form, multiple representatives from several of the districts noted that competition for human and monetary resources with neighboring school systems was a challenge. This concept of local protectiveness is often referred to in the literature as the “hidden curriculum,” in which local values and customs in one community can be vastly different from those in similar, nearby ones, leading to possible defensiveness regarding collaboration opportunities (Null 2023; Feldmann, 2003). The researcher instead encourages these districts to pool their efforts and note the assets of their regions in general, toward potentially a greater pool of teaching candidates for all being unearthed as opposed to handing such recruitment on their own. Successful examples in this regard include the Rural Schools Collaborative and regional teacher recruitment consortia (Pratt & McCabe-Juhnke, 2025).

Conclusions and Application of Research

This research project aimed to shed light on the multifaceted issue of teacher shortage in rural schools, as well as to provide evidence-based recommendations for addressing this challenge. By collaborating with stakeholders and leveraging diverse data sources, this study sought to make a meaningful contribution towards improving educational opportunities and outcomes for students in rural communities. Factors contributing to the poor level of attraction and retention of teachers

in rural areas include limited resources, professional isolation, and fewer opportunities for career advancement, among other. Despite efforts to improve retention through mentorship programs and professional development opportunities, challenges persist. Further research is needed to understand the specific factors influencing teacher retention in rural Illinois schools and to develop targeted strategies to address this issue effectively. Teacher recruitment in rural schools presents unique challenges due to factors such as geographic isolation, limited resources, and often lower salaries compared to urban areas. By understanding these factors, policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders can devise effective strategies to address this critical issue.

Teacher recruitment in rural schools requires a diverse approach that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities of rural communities. By implementing targeted recruitment programs, fostering community engagement, and providing professional development opportunities, stakeholders can attract and retain qualified educators to ensure the success of rural schools and the students they serve. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies and identify new approaches to address ongoing teacher shortages in rural areas.

The findings from this study will be disseminated with policymakers, educational authorities, and community stakeholders through reports, presentations, and workshops, as well as by engaging in advocacy efforts to promote the implementation of recommended strategies and policies. To aggregate the completed research from this travel into workshops, seminars, and other events for similar school districts in Kentucky as a means of pursuing best practices in the Commonwealth toward this issue.

In looking toward the future and sustained educator strengths for rural communities of many varieties, researchers may use this research to investigate the following paths:

- Long-term impact of recruitment and retention initiatives on student achievement and school performance.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of specific recruitment strategies in different rural contexts.
- Exploration of innovative approaches, such as virtual teaching positions and hybrid learning models, to address teacher shortages in rural areas.
- Examination of the role of policy interventions and funding mechanisms in supporting teacher recruitment and retention efforts.
- By strengthening the talent pool from which rural schools can draw for their teachers, the body of educators serving all types of schools in the United States can be enhanced.

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