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Promoting Rural Opportunity through Teaching: Strategies to Promote the Teacher Workforce in Rural Schools

Douglas Gagnon

Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire

Recent events have made clear that the plight of much of rural America was being largely overlooked. A persistent decline in manufacturing and agricultural sectors had hallowed out the economic base of many rural towns, leaving diminished prospects and casting a cloud of poverty over large swaths of the rural landscape. Politics, power, and populations increasingly reside in metropolitan centers, and many rural dwellers are at risk of being left behind in tomorrow's society. Though some yearn for a return to the good old days, where 20th Century jobs will allow 21st Century rural communities to prosper, a different approach is needed: returns to education are now higher than ever (Hout, 2012), while the industries that used to support rural areas are forecasted to decline over the next decade (U.S Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The true chance for rural places to thrive once again lies more in innovation and adaptation than it does in a revisiting old stomping grounds. Standing at the nexus of rural children and their opportunities for future success are schools.

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A great education provides care and instruction to students in a manner that creates an opportunity to meaningfully connect to society, and no single school-level factor matters more in this regard than teachers. Of course, there are countless ways in which schools can promote or impede a student's access to opportunity, and it is impossible to express all the ways in which rural schools succeed or fail. Here I choose to focus on efforts to improve and expand the rural teacher pool, but I fully acknowledge that this represents just one of the many necessary-but-not-sufficient factors that the health of any community rests upon. But examining equity through the lens of teachers is a sensible decision, for two reasons.

First, research has demonstrated the importance of teachers, and that not all students get the same access to high quality teachers. Studies have shown that teachers impact not only student learning, but also longer-term outcomes such as college attendance, earnings, and teen pregnancy rates (Chetty, Friedman, Rockoff, 2014) as well as the economy in general (Hanushek, 2011). However, rural teachers are less qualified than average according to nearly any metric available, including rates of novice teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2014) and teachers with masters degrees (Provasnik et al., 2007). Numerous factors combine which make it more difficult for many rural schools to attract, develop, and retain great teachers—although these factors are largely related to economic and geographical barriers faced by rural schools.

Second, it is within the control of states and localities to change the way they recruit and retain teachers. My colleague and I recently examined policies that are being put forth to improve rural staffing efforts in the country, finding three specific domains that emerged: grow your own initiatives, financial incentives, and promoting communities of practice (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Importantly, all the strategies discussed in this brief are permissible uses of federal Title IIA funding, although over 90 percent of such expenditures goes towards other areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). I now review each of these strategies, providing a common definition, the rationale behind such approaches, and some concrete suggestions for those who might have the chance to implement such strategies.

Grow Your Own

As the name implies, grow your own strategies refer to any initiative that aims to retrain or upskill local individuals in order to provide a stream of new, talented teachers into rural schools. The appeal behind this approach lies in the assumption that those who enjoy the lifestyle that a particular rural community affords are more likely to remain in that area as a teacher. Here are some ideas for rural schools and districts that might be considering such a strategy:

- *Find a source of local talent.* I spoke with one rural administrator who noted that a nearby U.S. Border Patrol station supplied her community with a valuable source of human capital, as a number of her school's paraprofessionals were the spouses of agents. Undoubtedly, businesses, military bases, near-retirees, and community colleges around the country could do the same for many other rural communities. Rural administrators may be able to forge informal relationships with such groups, and in doing so the increase the likelihood that a new teacher is discovered. Moreover, a number of states have programs that provide pathways for paraprofessionals to become classroom teachers, which provides an important avenue for turning talented, caring, but less credentialed educators into fully credentialed ones.
- *Partner with the nearest college or university whenever possible.* Reach out to the nearest teacher training institution to discuss your needs. Teacher preparation can impact the flow of teachers into rural schools in a number of ways: by promoting the right mix of subject area certifications, creating multiple certification options, incorporating rural-specific coursework, and by offering student internship placements in rural settings. Additionally, there are federal grant opportunities aimed at creating rural teacher residency programs, which seek to prepare more rural teachers through the establishment of sustained partnerships.
- *Think long term.* Many rural students might consider attending college and remaining close to home to be mutually exclusive options. One way to bridge this gap is to introduce education careers to promising rural high school students. Such a strategy could be as simple as a one-off seminar for interested students, or as complex as a conditional scholarship fund for students who agree to return to your school to teach. Such programs may lead some students and their families to be more receptive to the idea of higher education, and rural schools could gain an important source of future educators in the process.

Financial Incentives

Providing financial incentives is not a strategy limited to rural places, but the low teacher pay and high turnover found in many rural schools suggests that increasing financial incentives might be particularly effective in such an environment. Financial incentives have taken many forms, including loan forgiveness, merit-based pay, housing, and signing or retention bonuses. Currently, the landscape of financial incentives in the nation probably hurts equity more than helps, as wealthy schools are more likely to provide incentives, while rural schools are less likely to provide incentives for shortage subjects (Liang, Zhang, Huang, & Qiao, 2015). This is true despite the fact that many sources of federal funding which currently go to low-income rural schools can be purposed for such financial incentives. Evidence does suggest that implementing incentives is challenging (Scott & Ostler, 2016), and the

literature on the effectiveness of financial incentives is decidedly mixed. However, careful implementation can help an incentive to better achieve its goals. Here are some suggestions when incorporating financial incentives to improve teacher recruitment and retention:

- *Provide a strong rationale for your financial incentives.* It may seem obvious, but it is important to make a compelling case for a financial incentive. For instance, if you create an incentive that is only offered to teachers in high-need subject areas or schools, use data to support such a decision. Findings pertaining to applications per vacancy, teacher qualifications, and staff turnover that support the implementation of your program should be disseminated far and wide.
- *Seek teacher buy in.* Financial incentives are not always well-received by teachers, especially if they view aspects of the program (eligibility, reward structure, etc.) as unfair or capricious. For example, if teachers in a district largely view its performance evaluation to be unfair, it seems highly unlikely that a system of merit-based pay informed by the same performance evaluation would be viewed any differently. Any incentive that significantly damages school culture could easily do more harm than good.
- *Structure incentives with an understanding of human behavior.* While it is important that a financial incentive is generally supported by teachers, it is also important to recognize that its ultimate goal is to motivate actions that would

not otherwise occur—and the structure of an incentive program should reflect this understanding. For instance, we know that loss aversion is a more powerful psychological motivator than is gain seeking (Tversky, & Kahneman, 1991); can you structure a signing bonus so that teachers must repay a prorated amount if they leave before a specified amount of time? Additionally, while group incentives may be easier to implement, “free rider” effects probably crowd out the motivation that incentives intend to instill; targeted incentives hold more promise.

Rural Communities of Practice

Given that attracting new teachers can be difficult, it is important for rural schools to focus on the best source of high quality rural educators: those individuals who are already teaching in rural schools. Of course, it is not always easy to do so, with the size and isolation of rural schools again creating unique challenges. For instance, one report found that some rural teachers feel isolated because they did not have an opportunity to collaborate with others teaching the same subject (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). Rural communities of practice aim to better situate educators into their school and broader rural community, region, or beyond, in an effort to improve their development. This could include such strategies as creating rural-specific mentoring programs, creating school partnerships, or other outside-the-box

solutions. Here are a few additional ideas:

- *Situate teachers into the community.* Create programs for newer teachers to learn the assets of your community, including the resources, leisure activities, and people that make it special. Teachers who stay around are often times those who consider their school community home, so induction programs that appreciate this as well as professional aspects are likely to be more successful. Additionally, teachers should perform better in the classroom with an understanding of the supports and resources that exist around their schools.
- *Connect with other rural schools and districts.* Look for chances to bring rural teachers together, especially those from similar grade and content areas. Perhaps you could arrange professional development days during the school year in partnership with nearby districts, or offer summer institutes for teachers.
- *Capitalize on the digital revolution.* Rural schools are integrating digital technologies into instruction, as are all schools nowadays. Why not adapt these practices for teacher learning? For instance, rather than having principals review lesson plans, could they instead be sent to other teachers from similar content areas? Could remote observations of classrooms by subject matter peers, perhaps through

videoconferencing or video recordings, supplement your current modes of formative evaluation?

Case Study: A Combined Approach Tailored to District Context

The Lake and Peninsula School District (LPSD) sprawls over the sparsely populated Alaskan Peninsula, serving about 350 students on a land mass roughly the size of the West Virginia. Given the remoteness and inaccessibility of their schools (many of which require the use of seaplane to reach), LPSD understandably faces persistent difficulties in finding teachers. In order to support learning and hopefully provide a steady supply of new teachers, six years ago LPSD instituted a novel tutoring program. Partnering with a number of teacher preparation institutions, LPSD recruited college students to serve as online and in-person tutors. The in-person portion provided paid work, travel expenses, no-cost housing, and an induction program to tutors. Thus, a combined approach—one that sought out pre-service teachers from a relatively local talent pool, provided targeted financial incentives, and situated potential teachers into their schools' communities—was instituted in the hope that tutors would become LPSD teachers. And many did. Currently, one-third of the LPSD teaching staff is composed of former tutors, and achievement in the district has increased considerably since the inception of the program.

Conclusion

Swift and powerful changes in the world's economy have created a tremendous challenge for rural America, and through no fault of those that live there. Compounding the effects these changes is a historic underinvestment in rural schools—particularly poor ones. Key to the revival of rural communities is strong public education, and this requires that inequities must be addressed. Here I have only discussed one such area—innovative teacher staffing approaches—though there are many other important trends in rural education that also interact with rural vibrancy, including efforts towards rural school consolidation, access to technology, and outmigration or brain drain, just to name a few. Rather than leaving the cold hands of supply and demand to carve out an unequal distribution of teachers across the country, we can tip the scales and bring more great teachers to those students that need them the most. Our rural places have long been viewed as places where an entrepreneurial spirit, strong work ethic, and sense of community reign supreme. Not only do these values translate to tomorrow's economy—we need them there.

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Education Leadership Research Center (ELRC)
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411 Harrington Tower, TAMU 4226
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