Teacher Recruitment and Retention: What works in the Midwest

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) recently released the results of its survey on teacher recruitment and retention strategies in the Midwest. Among the key findings was the fact that small schools are an important mechanism for recruiting and keeping good teachers.

The survey, which was sent to superintendents in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin, is summarized in the report: Effective Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategies in the Midwest: Who is Making Use of Them by Debra Hare and James Heap. The report is based on the survey’s two main questions: 1) Do superintendents have difficulty retaining high-quality teachers? and 2) What strategies did superintendents implement to retain and attract high quality teachers and how effective are those strategies?

The most successful strategies included: new teacher support programs; small schools or restructuring schools to make them smaller; recruiting teachers from the local community; and treating teachers as professionals by implementing common planning time (time allotted for regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers) and involving teachers in decision making. According to Hare and Heap, “These strategies could be particularly attractive to small or rural school districts or low-wealth districts looking for ways to improve teaching...”
Finance Center

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“His experience as an advocate for social and economic justice in the fields of public education and civil rights law makes him an ideal leader in our efforts to assure educational equity and adequacy for rural schoolchildren.”

Since 1990, Malhoit has served as the Executive Director of the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, a statewide multi-issue policy research and advocacy organization focused on economic and legal issues that impact poor and rural communities. During his tenure with the Justice Center, Malhoit led its education reform program, which focused on equity and adequacy in the state school finance system, the racial achievement gap, the needs of Limited-English Proficient (LEP) students, and high stakes testing. From 1974 until 1990, he served as Executive Director of East Central Community Legal Services, a legal aid program serving 100,000 low-income people in a five-county region of North Carolina.

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without a large investment of new resources.”

The report’s top-rated strategy for attracting and retaining teachers is restructuring schools to make them smaller. To explain this, the authors cite research showing that smaller schools provide better teaching environments. In their recommendations, the authors write, “Keep schools small. State policy or practice should not force small schools and districts to become bigger. States should help small or rural schools come up with creative ways to address the challenges they face. They should also examine whether funding formulas encourage schools to become bigger.”

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Hare and Heap also recommend that states adopt policies “that ensure equal access to high-quality new teacher support.” While new teacher support programs have shown to be effective tools for helping new teachers adjust to the demands of teaching and keeping them in the teaching profession, NCREL’s report finds that rural and small districts are the least likely to provide a teacher support program. In Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, rural districts were significantly less likely to have new teacher support programs than were their urban and suburban counterparts. In Michigan, rural districts were more likely than their urban counterparts and less likely than their suburban counterparts to have teacher support programs. It is only in Ohio that rural districts have the most support programs.

Rural districts are also less likely to adopt the strategy of cultivating teachers from the surrounding communities. The “grow your own” approach, where districts provide non-teaching employees, parent volunteers, or other community members with the necessary support to complete a teaching degree, is most prevalent in urban districts. Overall, the poorest districts are the most likely to use this approach.

According to NCREL’s report, small and rural districts are also less likely to have common planning time. Only 42 percent of rural districts reported adopting an approach that includes team teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, and common planning time compared to 60 percent of suburban and 62 percent of urban districts.

Although the survey was limited to the Midwestern states, there are lessons to be learned for rural and small schools experiencing teacher shortages throughout the country. Policymakers at every level need to know that small schools attract good teachers. Keeping small schools intact is one of the best and least expensive strategies for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers. Small schools are generally an asset of rural places, but the fact that rural districts are less likely to offer new teacher support programs, use “grow your own” strategies, or incorporate common planning time means that rural districts are not always capitalizing on what they have to offer.

To read more about Effective Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategies in the Midwest: Who is Making Use of Them, visit the North Central Regional Education Laboratory website at www.ncrel.org or call 800.356.2735.

Rural Finance Fact:

Rural schools represented 22 percent of all public schools in the U.S. in 1997, yet they received 12.5 percent of all Federal funding, 14 percent of all state funding, and 11 percent of all local funding. Source: U.S. Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics, 2000.
Matters Of Fact

Rural South Carolina districts losing funds

Twenty-nine rural South Carolina school districts are facing a loss of funds. The state is trying to recoup more than $556,000 in funds that it overpaid rural districts; the state will deduct the funds from payments to be made in December. For one district, this will mean losing more than $120,000. This announcement comes on the heels of the news that South Carolina school districts are facing a $10.8 million decrease in state funding. The funding decrease is the result of a change in South Carolina’s state tax law. Last year, the state increased the tax break for elderly homeowners, which affects the amount of state funds available for schools.

Small Iowa districts short on funds for teacher pay

Iowa’s new teacher pay plan is leaving some small and rural districts scrambling to come up with funds. The Legislature-approved plan allocates $31.2 million for teacher salaries. Funds will be allocated to all Iowa schools using a formula based on each school’s enrollment and number of teachers. In order to participate, schools must raise beginning teacher salaries by $1,500 per year until the minimum salary of $28,000 is reached. The Iowa State Education Association has said that up to 65 districts will not receive the minimum needed from the state to participate. One small district needs to raise $30,000 to bring teacher pay to the minimum, but will only be receiving $22,000 from the state.

New NAEP scores show rural students in the middle

The recently released 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math scores show that, in general, rural and small town students in all grades score higher than their urban peers, but lower than their suburban peers. Of the rural and small town students, 70 percent of 4th graders, 67 percent of 8th graders, and 65 percent of 12th graders scored at or above the basic level. Twenty-three percent of 4th graders, 26 percent of 8th graders, and 13 percent of 12th graders scored at or above the proficient level. Two percent of 4th graders, 4 percent of 8th graders, and 1 percent of 12th graders scored at the advanced level. For more information or to download a copy of the report, visit www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard or call 202. 502.7344.

Wisconsin looks for ways to reduce taxes that fund schools

In Wisconsin, the “60% solution” is being discussed as a solution to state budget problems. It would mean decreasing state funding for public schools from 66.67 percent to 60 percent. Instead of the state paying the difference, the burden would be shifted to property owners. Yet Wisconsin has “revenue caps” in place that limit the amount of money that districts can raise. Considering that a big part of the state’s education funding formula is based on the number of students in a district, this puts small, rural districts in a bind—especially those with declining enrollments. The small, rural districts would have their already smaller slice of state funding decreased, would have to tax local homeowners more, but would be limited in the amount of funds they could raise.

New numbers on rural schools

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has released a statistical analysis report entitled Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools and Districts: School Year 1999-2000, which provides national and state-level information about public schools and school districts in the 1999-2000 school year. Data include the numbers and types of schools and local education agencies. Information about the numbers of students receiving services in programs for migrant education, limited English proficiency, and special education is included. According to the report, there were 17,199 rural schools in 1999-2000, accounting for 19.2 percent of all schools, down from 22 percent in 1997. Ten percent of public school students attend schools in rural places of 2500 or less. The report also includes the category “rural urban fringe” which is any place with 2,500 people or less that is within a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). There are 9,978 rural urban fringe schools (11.1 percent of all schools) that enroll 10.7 percent of all public school students. For a copy of the report, visit http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001339 or call 1-877-4-ED-PUBS.

Overheard Online:

Their world in a school bus

Recently, the Rural Trust’s online facilities discussion turned to the topic of busing in rural communities. What follows are excerpts from this discussion.

“A particularly dramatic way to represent ‘seat time’ on a bus during 12 years of schooling is to equate it with years of seat time in school. I’ve seen cases where kids were spending the equivalent of two years of school on the bus during their school careers.

“In collecting the views of school of all students in grades four through twelve in a school district abut 15 years ago, Jerry Smith and I learned that kids think of the time they spend on a school bus as being a part of school, and they resent the inefficiency of it.”— Tom Gregory, Indiana University

“Bus time is school time, and the kids are learning. They are learning how society works, how a pecking order works, how exclusion and humiliation work...I remember things sort of similar from my own childhood on the bus. But when I was a kid every single kid knew every other kid, and their parents knew each other, and the bus driver was Jim Ahearn whose brother drove the milk bulk truck, and he knew us and our parents and our brothers and sisters. I doubt there are many bus...
routes like that anymore, as the essential economy of rural society collapses, and 160 acre dairy farms are consolidated in 2,000 acre operations, and the farm towns wither as the elevators and implement dealers close. Forgive me for giving an obviously Midwestern vision of the rural economy; it’s where I’m from.

“My conclusion is that the bus will reflect the community that it is driving through, the same way the houses and landscape are mirrored in the windows. In a cohesive community, the ride may be long, but kids are endlessly adept at amusing themselves. If the kids are restrained by the social fabric of their community, then a bus driver will be able to keep things under control. …But if the community is fragmented, then the school bus society will reflect that. Because there is enforced inactivity and no effective supervision, kids will act out their vision of society on the bus during ‘loose time.’ Busing and buses aren’t the problem, the way we structure schooling (acting out our adult visions of what society should be!) may be the problem. If there’s a solution, it probably lies in changing our (adult) vision of the good society, the good community, or just ‘the good.’”—Stephen Olson, former school bus driver, current school board member, and ship surveyor in rural Maine

“Thanks for this reflection Stephen. I especially appreciated the insight that kids act out their vision of society on the bus during ‘loose time.’ Busing and buses aren’t the problem, the way we structure schooling (acting out our adult visions of what society should be!) may be the problem. If there’s a solution, it probably lies in changing our (adult) vision of the good society, the good community, or just ‘the good.’”—Craig Howley, Adjunct Professor at Ohio University, Director of ERIC/CRESS at AEL

Join the discussion! Tell us what you think about busing and facilities in your community. Sign on by sending an email to the facilities coordinator Barbara Lawrence at barbara.lawrence@ruraledu.org.