

**RURAL SCHOOL CHALLENGES WITH TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND  
RETENTION**

by

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A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

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## **ABSTRACT**

This final composite explores rural school challenges regarding teacher recruitment and retention. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study article that could be used for teaching doctoral or master's candidates in the field of educational leadership. The title of this article is "How Do You Get Funding to Recruit and Retain Quality Teachers?" This case explores rural teacher recruitment and retention efforts when the funding is not available to the school districts. The final scholarly deliverable is an empirical article titled "Rural School Challenges with Teacher Recruitment and Retention." This empirical article focuses on examining the unique challenges rural school districts face when it comes to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers.



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS  
Letter of Approval

April 27, 2023

Dr. Hooper:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2023.04.008 for your study titled, “**Rural School Challenges with Teacher Recruitment and Retention**”, meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Use of Human Subjects in Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **April 27, 2024**.

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include

the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format:  
WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ##/##/#### Expiration Date: ##/##/####.

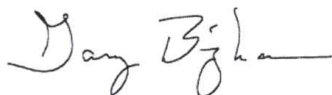
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an [Amendment/Continuation/Close out](#) form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham  
Chair, WTAMU IRB



Dr. Angela Spaulding  
Vice President of Research and Compliance

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, thank you to God. Thank you for the strength to overcome the struggles, the courage to take on the challenges, and the wisdom to be successful. Thank you for your blessings and the plans you have for my life.

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To the seven teachers who shared their stories: This study is possible because of you. Change is only possible if we understand the challenges you are experiencing. Thank you for being an inspiration to the lives of so many.

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# **How Do You Get Additional Funding to Recruit and Retain Quality Teachers?**

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## **Abstract**

Rural school districts face a myriad of challenges and often struggle to remain viable, but to financial struggles, dilapidated facilities, and the ability to obtain resources. However, one of the most crucial challenges is teacher recruitment. Rural teachers are compensated at a lower rate than the larger, more affluent districts, making the smaller districts less appealing. Additionally, rural schools are often demographically isolated, and the staff is required to travel longer distances, making it difficult to recruit teachers to the rural location. The facilities are often in disrepair and run down, which can be far from attractive to potential teachers. This case study examines rural school teacher recruitment and retention efforts.

*Keywords:* teacher recruitment, teacher retention, rural challenges.

### **How Do You Get Additional Funding to Recruit and Retain Quality Teachers?**

“Rural schools are crucial to the vitality of the communities they serve. The hearts and spirits of rural communities reside in their local schools” (Whaland, 2020, p. 1).

Rural school districts constantly face challenges when it comes to teacher recruitment and retention. Rural school districts are at risk of not remaining vital to the community if they are incapable of successfully retaining teachers (Guha et al., 2017). Watts (2016) stated, “Schools have a turnover rate of 50% every 3 years, and over 50% of teachers leave the education field within the first 5 years of employment” (p. 4). Although teacher recruitment and retention are not limited to rural school districts, they do struggle more than more affluent, larger schools.

Nationally, teacher shortages are growing, and filling these vacancies with qualified teachers is becoming more and more difficult (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). There are many implications when it comes to teacher turnover within a school district. Redding and Henry (2018) suggested that reducing the disparities in turnover is essential because the consequences of disrupting student learning are adversely affected, and the daily operations of the school are seriously interrupted. Additionally, when a teacher chooses to leave a district, there are considerable budgetary costs, and it disproportionately drains communities with limited resources and financial constraints (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Rural school districts are also faced with challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Moreover, rural schools often struggle with significant teacher shortages (Taie & Goldring, 2017), with some schools even reporting no applicants to choose from (Hammer et al., 2005). Literature on rural teacher recruitment

and retention has identified four main factors that contribute to the challenges: (a) geographic and social isolation, (b) lower salary, (c) challenging working conditions, such as having to teach different grade levels and subject areas, and (d) mandates set in place for highly-qualified teachers (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

The purpose of this case study is to examine teacher recruitment and retention efforts in rural school districts. The study provides in-depth knowledge as to why teachers decide to stay employed or leave rural districts.

### **Case Study**

Located less than 20 miles from a town with numerous businesses lies a tiny Texas school district, Sunset ISD that annually enrolls around 270 students. This rural district employs 30 full-time teachers and four part-time teachers. Over the past 3 years, the school district has faced some difficulties when it comes to recruiting and replacing teachers. Because the district does not offer a competitive salary for teachers, often it is in a position where there are few or no applicants. The principals have approached the superintendent many times to discuss unique ways to recruit teachers to the district, yet nothing has been very successful.

Three years ago, district enrollment was up to the point that part-way into the start of a new school year, another third-grade class was added. This critically stressed the available teacher pool. Mrs. Rhodes, the elementary principal, set out to find a teacher 6 weeks into the year; nonetheless, there was one teacher available, Mrs. White, who was finishing up an alternative teaching program to obtain her teaching certificate. She did not perform well, and her students only had a 30% passing rate on the STAAR assessment. She was reassigned, and ultimately, she decided to leave the district.

Fast-forwarding through the years, the district also struggled to obtain head coaches. For example, one (Mr. Jones), said in his interview that he liked the school, but not the one-hour commute or the remote location. Similarly, an established, well-respected math teacher in the area turned down a recruitment call from the principal. The district's rural location, she said, did not appeal to her in the least.

This past year, the district had several positions available: elementary reading/ELA, junior high math, and high school chemistry. Mrs. Rhodes received 10 applications for the elementary position, which was a surprise, but Mr. Driver, the junior high and high school principal, received only one application for the math position and none for the science position. Mr. Driver interviewed one applicant (Mr. Reed) and was impressed with his skills and eagerness to teach. Not that the luck of Mr. Driver had been going well, but a week before the school year was to begin, he received a call from Mr. Reed. "Mr. Driver, this is Mr. Reed; I am supposed to be the junior high math teacher this year," he said. "Unfortunately, I have been in an accident, and I am in the hospital and will not be able to take the position at this time." After ensuring he was okay from the accident, Mr. Driver discussed the option of taking the position later in the school year, but that was not feasible at this point because Mr. Reed would have to undergo multiple surgeries from his accident, and there is no timeline available of when he will be released to return to work. Therefore, the junior high math position was being taught by Mrs. Apple, a long-term substitute working part-time. And the high school chemistry class was being taught online through *Edgenuity*. Neither of which was the ideal situation for a campus.

At the end of this school year, the district will lose five teachers to retirement; at least, that is all that has been discussed to this point. This is a large, stressful number of positions to fill, especially when the applications are far from rolling into the hands of administrators. The salary that the district offers is not as enticing as that of larger, more affluent districts. Mrs. Rhodes approached the superintendent and business manager to see if the school could offer more than the state minimum to teachers in order to recruit them to the district. Mrs. Lee, the business manager, stated, “There is no additional money in the budget, so basically, there is nothing we can do.” To say the least, this was discouraging, and Mr. Barker, the superintendent, said, “Why don’t you call the neighboring districts and see if they have any applications, they can send your way?” Mrs. Rhodes, the elementary principal, thought to herself, “I wonder how good they are if that district didn’t want to hire them?”

This past summer, Mrs. Rhodes and Mr. Driver met with Mr. Barker to discuss options because this was a serious issue that continued to face the district. “There is simply not enough funds in the budget to offer above the state minimum,” the superintendent told them. Mr. Driver expressed his concern about the STAAR incentive money being taken away as well, “Can we at least consider reinstating the incentive for teaching a STAAR-tested subject?” Mrs. Rhodes added, “We will have to come up with something to lure teachers to the district that are worth having.” The frustrating part of the situation was that many individuals felt that there were positions at the school that were not needed, for example, the assistant band director for the 35-member band. However, funds were not available to hire quality teachers to assist us with accountability.

The district contacted the local service center for assistance in recruiting teachers. However, unfortunately, the service center had not been supportive to this point and often offered little to no aid to the district. Often, they afforded the advice of “grow your own,” which in reality was a great way to recruit teachers, unless you were a district that graduated on average 20 students a year. Moreover, many of these students did not attend college.

The school district was located close to many larger districts in a much more convenient location. Just eight miles to the northeast was a town with numerous businesses, a junior college, and a large 3A school district that paid \$8,000 more than Sunset ISD. To the southeast, 25 miles, was another large community that had a big 3A district that also paid \$8,000 above Sunset ISD. Only 30 miles west of the district was an extremely large town, which was home to a 6A district, a university, a junior college, and countless business opportunities. The school districts in this area paid a minimum of \$9,000 above Sunset ISD. Thus, located relatively close to Sunset ISD, there were various options when it came to choosing a district with a higher salary, a convenient geographic location, and availability of resources. Therefore, the question remained: How, as an administrator, can Sunset ISD be more enticing to quality teachers? Are there funds to supplement or grants available, and if so, why has Sunset ISD not researched this avenue, or possibly is the district satisfied with being mediocre?

### **Teaching Notes**

Notable disproportion exists today in the funding of public school districts. According to Johnson and Howley (2015):

Federal policies that drive school improvement initiatives (e.g., those regulating the functioning of schools and those managing the distribution of resources) are often not observant of such differences, adopting one-size-fits-all approaches resulting in a policy context that is ineffective and even harmful to rural schools and communities. (p. 224)

This creates inequality in the education students receive by affecting per-pupil spending, teacher recruitment and retention, class size, and availability of resources (Satz, 2007).

Research suggests that geographic isolation, poverty, and lack of resources from the school and community contribute to influencing the development and success of students in rural school districts (Bright, 2018). Additionally, schools are becoming more segregated due to the funding discrepancy between districts.

Policymakers seldom contemplate what it costs to afford students a superior education while considering the unique challenges of rural school districts (Malhoit, 2005). This habitually leaves students in rural districts access to limited resources and opportunities. “A sound state funding system is one that simultaneously provides all schools with *equitable* and *adequate* funding while also recognizing that some schools may need extra funding in light of student needs and community characteristics” (Malhoit, 2005, p. 7). The distinct problem this study addresses is the absence of state and federal policies that consider rural school districts and funding inequalities.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In this case, Mr. Barker, the superintendent, has not been supportive of his administrators when it comes to teacher recruitment efforts. What are some



practical solutions for teacher recruitment that the administrators can try, given the limited support of their superintendent?

2. Mrs. Lee does not support the idea of offering a competitive salary to obtain quality teachers. What evidence would you present to Mrs. Lee to help her understand the urgency of recruiting teachers?
3. Rank the following characteristics and then make a case for considering this ranking when creating a teacher retention plan: years of experience, age, socioeconomic status, race, values, and qualifications.
4. What does the district in this case study need to improve teacher recruitment?  
What current resources can the district use to improve its teacher recruitment?  
What other non-financial incentives might they use?
5. What impact does compensation have on teacher recruitment in rural districts?  
How does compensation compare to the geographic location of the district?  
Quality of the facilities? Availability of resources?
6. Consider your school district. How do the recruiting efforts compare to those in the case study? What is similar, and what is different?
7. What are alternative recruiting efforts the district can use to attract teachers?  
Do you feel that job fairs could be beneficial for this district? Why or why not?

### **Activities**

1. Divide into two groups. Each side will debate from the position of (a) Mrs. Rhodes, the elementary principal, and Mr. Driver, the junior high and high school principals, and (b) Mr. Barker, the superintendent, and Mrs. Lee, the business manager. During the debate, consider the positive and negative

consequences from each group's point of view on teacher recruitment. Other than compensation, what can the district offer as far as teacher recruitment?

2. Review the current job opening posting. Outline the strengths and weaknesses.

How can it be revised to be more enticing to applicants?

3. Consider the following challenges for recruiting teachers to your district. How

would you rate the extent to which each of the factors, with one being *no challenge* and six being *extremely challenging* factors facing the district?

- Low/uncompetitive salaries
- Geographic isolation
- Social isolation
- Assignments/teaching too many subjects or grade levels
- School culture/environment
- Proximity to higher-paying school districts

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## **Rural School Challenges with Teacher Recruitment and Retention**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine the unique challenges rural school districts face when it comes to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. **Research Method:** A qualitative, exploratory case study research design was implemented through open-ended focus group interviews with seven teachers from rural districts. **Findings:** The findings in this study indicated that rural teachers identified three factors common to rural teacher recruitment and retention challenges: (a) pay, (b) rural location, (c) resources. **Conclusion:** Findings suggest that lower pay, rural location, and limited resources are the core challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas. Furthermore, this study provides possible solutions for rural teacher recruitment and retention challenges.

*Keywords:* recruitment, retention, teacher turnover, school leadership, rural school challenges.

## **Rural School Challenges with Teacher Recruitment and Retention**

Teachers make a profound difference in young people's lives and significantly impact their daily learning. Unfortunately, teachers are becoming increasingly problematic to find, and districts are struggling to staff their classrooms with certified, high-quality teachers. However, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers for rural school districts continues to present additional obstacles (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA; Dick, 2017) defined rural as having between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate of less than 20% for the last 5 years, or less than 300 students enrolled. Moreover, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2016), Texas has more than 2,000 campuses that are considered rural, which is more than any other state. The NCES (2022) reported that 44% of public schools would have teacher vacancies during the 2022 school year, and more than half of the vacancies are from resignations. Maranto and Shuls (2013) indicated an inequitable teacher supply distribution, and poor rural schools have extreme difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers.

Rural schools tend to employ less experienced and less qualified teachers than non-rural schools (Monk, 2007). Teacher recruitment and retention is a crisis that is currently affecting school districts throughout the nation. District administrators have the task of ensuring that highly qualified teachers from one year educate the students to the next. With teachers separating from the profession at an alarming rate, the concern has become increasingly dire. The shortage of teachers has continuously increased because of

teachers who shift from one district to another in search of better working conditions or higher salaries (Podolsky et al., 2017; Watts, 2016).

Teaching in rural school districts continues to worsen while the problem of recruiting and retaining teachers remains a problem (Shikalepo, 2020). Rural schools face distinct challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, including lower salaries, geographic isolation, difficult working conditions, limited resources, lack of benefits, and limited professional growth opportunities (Beesley et al., 2010; Giles, 2020; Hammer et al., 2005; Podolsky et al., 2017). Rural schools cannot compete with the larger districts that offer competitive wages, additional resources, and more geographically attractive locations with ample housing opportunities. Hammer et al. (2005) argued that it is no surprise that rural school districts struggled with teacher recruitment and retention because there is limited reliance on targeted incentives or relocation and housing assistance.

Unfortunately, rural school districts do not have the same access to highly-qualified teachers in every classroom as non-rural schools. Geography should not determine which children receive a quality education and which do not. "Societies' obligation to educate students should not depend on a child's demographic good fortune. Nor should geography dictate a child's educational destiny" (Malhoit, 2005, p. 9).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the unique challenges rural school districts face when it comes to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. The conditions examined included non-competitive salaries, isolation, working conditions,



lack of resources, teacher preparation programs, and state and federal school policies.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the challenges of recruiting teachers to teach in Texas rural school districts?
2. What are the challenges of retaining teachers in rural school districts in Texas?
3. What are possible solutions to the challenges of the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural school districts in Texas?

This study was unique because it focused on Texas rural school districts, and since Texas has such a large population of rural schools, it is very pertinent and significant to administrators and teachers (Moreno, 2023). Additionally, Texas has developed many strategies and solutions to combat, with one being school districts have the option to become a District of Innovation (DOI). Being a DOI allows districts to be eligible for designations if specific performance requirements are met, and the district follows certain procedures for adoption as outlined in Statute. The designation provides the district will be exempt from certain sections of the Texas Education Code to be more aligned with the goals of the school district. Moreover, this study is unique because it was conducted post the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, teacher recruitment and retention were not nearly as critical as it is currently.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Two frameworks guided this study. The theoretical framework is the factors of the push/pull theory as it relates to teacher attrition. The conceptual framework is based on the research in teacher retention and recruitment of Linda Darling-Hammond. Each of

these frameworks will drive the study throughout the literature review, the data collection, and data analysis processes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The push/pull theory was started by Lee in 1966 when he proposed a justification for migration (Faridi, 2018). The push/pull theory supports that “the reasons for migration and immigration are because people can improve their living conditions through migration” (Pan, 2019, p. 123). Push factors encourage people to leave their present location and move somewhere else, while pull factors are what attract people to new locations (Higgins, 2008).

Choices made by teachers and specifically their mobility patterns are driven by many different factors (Mikalsen, 2021). The push/pull factors can be used as an explanation of an individual’s actions in specific situations. Push factors contain negative work-related conditions that push teachers from the teaching profession; perhaps an example is a lack of teacher recognition (Ingersoll & May, 2012). They are considered external constraints where the individuals feel they have no choices (Mikalsen, 2021). Additionally, pull factors are positive influences that keep teachers in their current teaching position or influences from another position that convince them to switch professions, like a new challenge or opportunities for career advancement (Shah et al., 2010).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This literature review is guided by Linda Darling-Hammonds’s (2003) study that identified reasons teachers leave the profession. Darling-Hammond (2003) identified working conditions as the primary motivator in the decision of teachers to stay in the

classroom. Poor working conditions are often common in small, rural schools.

Acheampong and Gyasi (2019) posited that poor working conditions in rural areas are a big setback in teacher retention, and Loeb et al. (2012) confirmed that schools with desirable working conditions are far more successful at teacher recruitment and retention. Additionally, Darling-Hammond (2003) indicated that even though teachers are generally more motivated as individuals, districts still must offer competitive wages in order to keep teachers. Loeb and Luczak (2013) identified lower salaries for rural schools as a big issue in attracting teachers to the district. Additionally, there are notable differences in the salary gap between rural and non-rural schools (Pan, 2006). Another challenge for rural recruitment and retention is the teacher preparation program. Teacher preparation programs fail to prepare teachers for rurality, and they are rarely prepared to meet the needs of the students (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Finally, state and federal policies inadequately address the needs of rural schools making it difficult to compete in teacher recruitment and retention (Monk, 2007).

Darling-Hammond (2003) is the guiding framework for this study; however, since then, others have expanded on her work to identify additional factors for recruitment and retention motivators. Hammer et al. (2005) determined that geography played an important role in a school's ability to recruit and retain teachers due to geographical and social isolation. Additionally, rural schools are at a disadvantage when it comes to the availability of resources. Hellsten et al. (2011) stated that a lack of resources could motivate teachers to leave the classroom because it adds stress and may deter them from a specific school. Finally, state and federal policies inadequately address the needs of rural schools, making it more of a challenge for recruitment and retention efforts.

Policymakers play an important part in increasing the chances that rural, low-income schools will attract and keep teachers (Johnson et al., 2004).

The conceptual framework clarifies the rural teacher recruitment and retention issues, which are relevant to understanding the rural challenges. Noncompetitive salaries, undesirable working conditions, and inadequate teacher preparation programs are major motivators to rural teachers' decisions to remain in the teaching profession (Acheampong & Gyasi, 2019; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Irving et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2004, 2014, 2022; Lavalley, 2018; Monk, 2007; Pan, 2006; Tran et al., 2018).

### **Review of Literature**

The literature review aims to identify challenges related to rural recruitment and retention efforts. An examination of rural teacher retention and recruitment is critical in this time of teacher shortages. Rural-specific literature recognizes these challenges as noncompetitive salaries, isolation, non-favorable working conditions, limited resources, lack of rural-focused preservice preparation programs, and the need for rural policies.

#### ***Noncompetitive Salaries***

Numerous research studies address the need to provide teachers with a salary commensurate to other professionals with equal schooling (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Lankford et al., 2002; Loeb & Myung, 2020; Malhoit, 2005; Reimers, 2000). Teachers in rural areas are not well paid, compared to their counterparts in other professions with the same experience and education level (Jimerson, 2003). A large portion of the literature suggests that starting teachers are more likely to teach in certain areas when the salaries are higher (Jimerson, 2003; Lankford et al., 2002; Loeb & Myung, 2020; Malhoit, 2005;

Murnane & Olsen, 1990). Rural schools typically have fewer financial resources, and therefore, they cannot pay the teachers a competitive salary (Malhoit, 2005).

Moreover traditionally, professions in education are perceived to be low-paying, and pay is even lower for rural districts with a low tax base (Irving et al., 2020). The research proposes that salary differences play a tremendous role in assisting or worsening a school district's ability to recruit and retain teachers (Loeb & Luczak, 2013). The correlation between teacher retention and salary amounts increasingly adds to rural schools' challenges. Murnane and Olsen (1990) proposed that teachers who receive higher wages remain in the profession longer than those who receive lower wages. Additionally, rural districts often struggle to compete with larger, more affluent schools only a few miles away, with much more to offer the staff and students. Some of the lowest-paid teachers are in rural districts, with an alarming amount of student poverty rates and lower student achievement, resulting in migration from rural to urban schools (Miller, 2012). Children educated in the highest poverty areas often need more support and more teachers (Lavalley, 2018).

Pan (2006) also suggested a noteworthy difference in the pay gap between rural, suburban, and urban districts, with the gap even being as high as 18%. This difference in pay negatively affects rural school districts when it comes to recruiting quality teachers simply because they cannot compete. This persistent gap hits the rural districts that are geographically located near larger urban schools. Rural school districts would jump at the opportunity to pay teachers more. However, with limited budgets and dwindling public funding from the state, the local property taxes must make up for the gap, which is often impossible (Burney, 2019).

Teacher salaries vary depending on the state, but generally, across the United States, teachers are compensated less than any other profession offered to college graduates (Podolsky et al., 2017). Texas ranks 28<sup>th</sup> in teacher salaries, making approximately \$7000 less than the national average (Burney, 2019). Ingersoll (2004) indicated that a majority of individuals who choose to leave small rural schools reportedly did so because of poor salaries. The average annual teacher salary in rural schools is \$69,797, and in suburban and urban districts, the average is \$74,153 (Showalter et al., 2019). Even though rural schools often serve the neediest students, they cannot compete with suburban districts. Kansas reportedly had the lowest average teacher salary at \$54,454, and Alaska had the highest with \$102,736 (Showalter et al., 2019). On average, rural teachers make approximately \$10,000 less than non-rural school teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Wealthier districts tend to supplement teacher salaries, while rural districts remain near the bottom of the pay scale, giving them a competitive advantage over rural schools when it comes to recruiting and retaining teachers (Malhoit, 2005).

The urgency to keep rural classrooms staffed is not trivial; more than 31% of the schools are located in rural areas, and startlingly more than 8 million students attend rural districts (Jimerson, 2003). Rural schools face higher operating costs due to their size and geographic location. Therefore, they are frequently tasked with hiring more teachers per pupil to offer specific classes for a limited amount of students (Monk, 2007).

Research suggests that salary strongly predicts teacher recruitment and retention in rural school districts with a high poverty rate (Ingersoll, 2004; DeFeo et al., 2017). Furthermore, those school districts that offer higher wages continuously have lower

turnover rates (Williams et al., 2021). Moreover, of the rural teachers who receive training in the school district, nearly 25% will leave for more affluent schools, seeking a higher salary and less commuting time (Kearney et al., 2018). Teachers are not going to drive further distances for less pay. According to Maranto and Shul (2013), teachers frequently leave low-achieving schools to seek employment in high-paying, over-achieving schools. Additionally, in a study by Tran et al. (2018), teachers were asked open-ended questions about teacher recruitment and retention. A common theme was adequate pay, a baseline the district must meet.

### **Isolation**

Isolation occurs when individuals are located far from areas and communities that could provide support services, a luxury that rural teachers are not accustomed to; therefore, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to receiving educational support (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Shikalepo, 2020). Teacher turnover is often higher in rural districts because of the isolation and inability to adjust to the rural environment (Lavalley, 2018). Isolation can be geographical, social, cultural, or professional and is considered a disadvantage of rural teaching (Hammer et al., 2005).

### ***Geographical Isolation***

Rural school districts are commonly located great distances away from suburban areas, which has led to further challenges due to the geographic remoteness of the school districts. Hammer et al. (2005) noted that geography had been shown to play an imperative role in recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools. Many teachers in rural school districts have stated that geographic, educational, and social isolation impacts their decision to leave the profession or transfer to another school district.

Additionally, school districts that are geographically isolated have more significant challenges attracting teachers to the area (Hammer et al., 2005). There is limited access to housing and public transportation, and travel costs are relatively high because of the long distances individuals must travel. These issues are reportedly seen to have a negative effect when it comes to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural districts (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019). Young, beginning teachers tend to find rural schools that are geographically isolated far less appealing than seasoned teachers (Proffit et al., 2002). Research shows that rural school districts that are located within close proximity to suburban areas are more likely to be successful at teacher recruitment. Still, on the other hand, they are not successful at retaining them for significant periods (Hammer et al., 2005).

These teachers leave in such a short time because they view a rural school as a place to begin their career, but they soon become attracted to suburban schools that offer much higher salaries (McClure & Reeves, 2004). In addition to the short time teachers remain in a rural school district, the turnover rate also tends to be higher in rural schools due to the isolation of the location and the adjustments needed to live in these areas (Lavalley, 2018). McClure and Reeves (2004) also noted that the geography of a school plays a significant role in rural school districts' ability to attract and retain teachers. Teachers have felt isolated due to the geographical remoteness of rural schools and the distance from accessing economic organizations (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

### ***Social Isolation***

Social isolation is another challenge that has been reported by rural school teachers, particularly if the teacher did not grow up in or around a rural location. A



feeling of social isolation is described as a factor in why teachers choose not to work in a rural district. Social isolation can be defined as a lack of contact with other individuals in general, including friends, family members, and neighbors (Henning-Smith et al., 2019). They tend to feel they lack a strong network of friends and few social contacts outside of school, and for single teachers, the dating pool is limited. Rural school districts are likely to have considerably fewer people to interact with on a daily basis, therefore, creating a sense of social isolation among many teachers. Additionally, many teachers who choose to work in a rural district often leave within a relatively short time because they feel like they lack social interactions and feel lonely. A vast amount of research has shown an alarming trend when it comes to social isolation and the effects it can have on one's well-being (Azano et al., 2020).

### ***Professional Isolation***

Professional isolation is an issue unique to rural school districts concerning geographic location. According to Azano et al. (2020), professional isolation can present challenges for a rural school with only one teacher per grade. Isolation leaves teachers feeling alone and lacking in support, which can be stressful for new teachers in rural locations. The lack of opportunities to connect and learn from peers eliminates one of the most beneficial learning opportunities, relying on and learning from one another (Blanchet & Bakkegard, 2018). Shikalepo (2020) suggested that this type of isolation has the risk of achieving a low-performance standard because the availability of support services is limited, thus resulting in poor quality of teaching. The remoteness of rural school districts leads to high levels of deprivation because they are isolated from different levels of support for teaching and learning opportunities, and there is often a lack of

support from community members (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019). Krakehl et al. (2020) stated that professional isolation among teachers would lead to increased work-related stress and teacher attrition. According to Azano et al. (2020), feeling a part of the community of colleagues is beneficial for new teachers in rural areas and will help them flourish in their profession.

Teachers in rural areas are not as likely to have the chance to engage in quality professional development due to the geographic location of the school and the great distances and time associated with traveling. Teachers are more isolated and detached from professional development and opportunities for training due to the rural locations (Acheampong & Gyasi, 2019). Teachers in rural districts have limited access to professional learning opportunities. The lack of professional development makes teachers feel professionally isolated because the options are limited when it comes to career advancement for further studies (Shadreck, 2012; Shikalepo, 2020). The cost of sending teachers and other staff members to professional development classes or conferences in urban areas is expensive and often prohibited in rural schools (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019). In addition to the lack of professional development opportunities, teachers also need support with curriculum planning for new teachers and scaffolding and lesson structure (Garvis, 2012). In an effort to reduce this type of isolation, Blanchet and Bakkegard (2018) suggested six different ways to overcome professional isolation: (a) Collaborate through Edcamps, (b) virtual classrooms, (c) virtual PLCs (professional learning communities), (d) personalize traveling professional development, (e) offer continuing education credit for innovation, and (f) provide infrastructure support.

### ***Cultural Isolation***

Another challenge that teachers have reported in rural school districts is cultural isolation. Teaching in rural schools poses challenges to teachers who are not from rural areas, and they will either make the needed adjustments or choose to leave. In a study conducted by Tran et al. (2018), teachers reported they experienced cultural isolation, and there were stark differences in their personal backgrounds compared to the backgrounds of their students. Moreover, teachers who move to remote communities face challenges when it comes to adjusting to unfamiliar cultures and often feel like an outcast (DeFeo et al., 2017). Cultural isolation is common for first-year teachers, who often will move within the first few years to a location they can culturally relate (Hellsten et al., 2011)

Working and living in rural locations can yield problems for many individuals because of the great distance from many resources. However, research has indicated that teachers raised in rural areas are less likely to experience feelings of isolation. They are educated and familiar with the rural conditions and challenges, and they are comfortable with the geographic location and remoteness of the school (Shikalepo, 2020).

### **Working Conditions**

Working conditions are essential in allowing schools to deliver high-quality education (Shikalepo, 2020). According to Acheampong and Gyasi (2019), a poor working environment creates enormous obstacles to teacher attrition in rural schools. Like most professions, teachers are sensitive to their work environments, and if they are unhappy, they will likely leave (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Hanushek et al., 2004; Podolsky et al., 2017). According to Ali et al. (2013), working conditions refer to the working environment and circumstances such as workload, facilities, legal rights,

responsibilities, hours worked, and the overall climate within the organization. Difficult working conditions are a noteworthy contributor to rural teacher recruitment and retention challenges. Research indicates that supportive working conditions improve effective teaching methods and increase teacher retention rates (Loeb et al., 2005). Working conditions that are less supportive have increased teacher turnover rates and less qualified teachers (Ingersoll, 2004). Rice (2010) identified five domains of working conditions that have a significant effect on teachers: (a) leadership, (b) facilities, (c) empowerment, (d) time policies, and (e) professional development.

### **Facilities**

Akyeampong and Stephens (2002) indicated that teachers have stated they have concerns about the quality of accommodations available in rural areas and the concern for the quality of life being lower. Additional reported concerns are the classroom facilities, school resources, and availability of leisure activities (Towse et al., 2002). Numerous rural school buildings are aging and needing immense repairs because there have been decades of deferred maintenance. Malhoit (2015) proposed that it is demanding when teaching students in a building with leaks, rotting floors, inadequate lighting, air conditioner, and heating. Additionally, he suggested that these rundown buildings send the message that the students and their education are not of value. However, depressed economies, lower property values, and an inadequate tax base often common to rural schools have joined in averting new construction or regular maintenance needed on the older buildings (Montgomery, 2010). Moreover, rural schools with lessening property values and insufficient tax base cannot pass a bond that would be adequate for the construction of a new school building (Tran et al., 2019).

## **Workloads**

Osterholm et al. (2006) reported that one of the most frequent complaints of rural teachers is the heavy workload that comes from teaching multiple preparations, and they are becoming overwhelmed. Rural teachers often teach more out-of-subject classes; for example, a high school biology teacher may also teach junior high science if the need arises within the district. "It's hard to escape the conclusion that the real beneficiaries of the localized teacher market are the wealthy suburban districts that turn out high shares of college graduates and have attractive working conditions" (Monk, 2007, p. 164). "Difficult working conditions may drive much of the difference in turnover of teachers and the transfer of teachers across schools" (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007, p. 69).

Furthermore, teachers in rural schools are often expected to accomplish an immense amount of duties, such as teaching multiple subjects, teaching various grade levels, taking on leadership roles, and volunteering for extracurricular activities (Mahan, 2010). Rural schools face unique problems in terms of working conditions because student enrollment is often lower. Therefore, teachers must teach multiple disciplines or outside of their specific certification area (McClure & Reeves, 2004). The excessive responsibilities, unreasonable demands, endless paperwork, and other duties have resulted in teachers feeling a burden of non-teaching responsibilities; thus, it is consequential that they either leave the district or leave the profession (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Furthermore, teachers have reported that a great deal of paperwork that is required often leaves them feeling overwhelmed because they have a limited amount of time to plan and prepare to deliver the instruction (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

## **Leadership**

For decades, school principals have been acknowledged as significant contributors to the success of a school district. Rice (2010) suggested that leadership is the most prominent dimension affecting a teacher's decision to stay or leave a school. Additional influences that have a negative impact on working conditions and lead to low retention rates in rural districts are the lack of independence, teachers feeling restricted when it comes to decision-making, and there is little or no support from the community or administrators in the classroom (Hammer et al., 2005; McClure et al., 2004). In many rural schools, the administrator is available to offer less support to the teachers due to the added responsibilities they have accrued. There is a limited number of individuals to delegate or assign management tasks, creating a more demanding workload for the principal. Osterholm et al. (2006) suggested that administrators need to focus on three categories to retain teachers, which include (a) systematic job analysis, (b) establishing support groups for educators, and (c) providing benefits and rewards.

## **Diversity**

Teachers in rural school districts must deal with a broader range of student abilities within their classrooms. In small rural school districts, often, there is only one teacher per grade level; therefore, in a single classroom, the student abilities may range from extremely low to very intelligent. With small numbers of students in the classrooms, teachers are limited in their ability to specialize and are obligated to deal with a wide range of student needs. Fluctuating enrollment can also lead to an increased workload for the teachers. Increasing enrollment leads to expanding the curriculum and offering additional courses, thus putting more responsibility on the teachers (Monk, 2007).

## **Limited Resources**

Rural school districts face a host of challenges, and the lack of resources only adds to the escalating pressures. When recruiting or retaining teachers, they may consider the availability or lack of curriculum, instructional material, and other resources when deciding to stay or leave for another district. One of the most frequently mentioned factors that influence the quality of instruction for rural school districts is deficiencies in resources, which include instructional materials, educational supplies, and adequate space. According to Harley and Wedekind (2004), the issue of resources is multi-dimensional. Research indicates that rural teachers have often expressed that there is a lack of resources accessible to them as compared to non-rural teachers. The inability to obtain resources can habitually be a significant determinant if a teacher feels they have the necessary tools to educate the students and plays an essential role in their decision to teach in a rural location. Hellsten et al. (2011) suggested that having inadequate material available to teachers creates additional stress on their already demanding workload. Additionally, Monk (2007) stated that teachers might find enticing opportunities in non-rural locations capable of providing better resources than rural schools.

Johnson et al. (2022) indicated that coupled with the teacher shortage issue and rural districts' lack of resources. It negatively affects the student's ability to receive an equitable education. Harley and Wedekind (2004) suggested that rural schools lack material provisions such as textbooks, physical space, libraries, electricity, and proper facilities to facilitate an effective learning environment. Rural teachers report feeling more anxious when there is a lack of equitable resources available to them, making rural recruitment even more challenging. Small rural schools say that resources are declining,

and they are forced to do more with less because the funding is inadequate, leaving them lacking the necessities to provide a good education. Furthermore, rural districts are challenged when recruiting teachers because there is a lack of advanced classes (Starr & White, 2008). Showalter et al. (2019) suggested that rural schools are at a disadvantage because they do not offer advanced placement classes or have STEM learning resources available to them.

Technology is also a challenge in rural districts; however, the use of technology in classrooms has increased tremendously throughout the years. Many rural schools in the country do not have the high-speed internet needed to use online technologies; additionally, many schools do not have the funds available to purchase technology, and often, they do not have the ability to use the technology accessible to them (Du Plessis, 2014). Research indicates that teachers have reported that they feel as if they are the dumping ground to receive used equipment from area businesses or urban schools (Du Plessis, 2014). Because many rural schools have a high poverty rate, they face limitations with their budgets, putting technology on the back burner. According to Sundeen and Sundeen (2013), rural school districts must find creative avenues to provide instructional technologies in the classrooms. They suggested identifying alternative routes of funding, such as applying for grants. In addition to the challenges associated with obtaining technology because of budget constraints, there are also limitations regarding the teacher's ability. Professional development is often scarce in rural school districts because of the distances to travel to the service centers. Therefore, rural school districts may find ways of obtaining the equipment for instructional technologies, but having to be trained on the proper use is limited, making teachers reluctant to implement it.



However, Brenner (2021) suggested that rural schools may lack adequate resources, but with some resourcefulness and an open mind, they can locate plenty of resources. This seems logical; however, when you consider the added workload rural educators are responsible for, this additional stress could be avoided. Rural districts need to work harder to locate the resources and find additional funds to aid in the purchase of these resources. The students should not have to receive a lesser quality of education because the state and federal funding system has failed rural school districts.

### **Rural-Focused Pre-service Preparation for Teachers**

Nearly one in five students in the United States attend rural schools, which suggests that more students attend rural schools than the nation's 85 largest school districts combined (Showalter et al., 2019). Many of these schools serve high numbers of minority students with higher-than-average poverty rates and lower achievement rates. Rural teacher shortages have only increased over time, and they will continue to do so unless there is a change in how teacher preparation programs are designed. There is a surplus of teacher preparation programs, but only a limited amount addresses rural teaching (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Additionally, research indicates that aspiring teachers lack the preparedness to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students (Wenger et al., 2012). There has been a growing amount of research that suggests the development of rural education teacher education classes need to be integrated into teacher preparation programs (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Budge, 2006; Islam, 2012; Masinire et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2010; White & Kline, 2012). There are numerous facets of rural education that could be incorporated into teacher preparation programs to prepare aspiring educators better (Azano & Stewart, 2016).

There has been increased recognition of the need to prepare teachers for the diversity they will face in the classrooms. Still, there has been little attention on preparing them for the community's diversity or locations where they may find themselves teaching (White & Kline, 2012). Azano and Stewart (2016) suggested that teacher candidates initially regard rural locations as pleasant places; however, they lack resources and technology and view the students as less motivated than suburban students. Additionally, Azano and Stewart (2016) reported that students experience anxiety about teaching in a rural district because they grew up in a non-rural environment, and it would limit their capacity to relate to the students.

Many scholars advocate for pre-service teacher preparation programs to comprehend the "rural social space" or the uniqueness of rural schools and communities (Reid et al., 2010). Numerous facets of rural teaching could be supplementary to pre-service teacher education programs (Masinire et al., 2014), such as attaining knowledge of the relationship between the school and community and knowing the importance of the place (Budge, 2006; White, 2011). Azano and Stewart (2016) posit that teacher education programs should explore the nuanced intricacies of rural education and be provided with meaningful field experiences. There is significant importance placed on pre-service teacher programs to understand rurality and the benefits and trials it involves. Additionally, pre-service teachers need to have the opportunity to reflect on what it is to be a rural educator and consider how they will meet the needs of those students.

Pre-service teacher preparation should ensure teachers recognize and value rural communities' symbolic and social capital (Reid et al., 2010). Furthermore, Reid et al. (2010) developed a model of rural social space, which is a theoretical model for

understanding rural schools and locations, coming to know, and preparing rural teachers in terms of the interrelation of economy, geography, and demography. Rural social space could be beneficial when considering staffing issues because it exposes the pre-service teachers to the space; they have the chance to see what it is like firsthand rather than not being able to see beyond the stereotypes or rurality (Reid et al., 2010). Rural practicums are the most popular approaches to instilling an understanding of rural social space for pre-service teachers (Kline & Walker, 2015)

The lack of rural education in teacher preparation programs is only adding to the significant problems of staffing these schools. Reid et al. (2010) noted that, in the social world of education, rural schools and commonalities are insulted and have been referred to as deficient, backward, and socially undesirable. Perhaps, providing rural education can prepare future teachers for the challenges they will face, as well as educate them on the uniqueness of rural school districts. However, Irvin et al. (2020) indicate that there are several universities across the nation that have responded to this rural teacher crisis and have designed exemplary rural teacher preparation programs. The University of New Hampshire incentivizes recruits with a 50% discount for instate tuition, a \$28,000 stipend, and a laptop for a 3 year commitment to a rural district located in New Hampshire. Additionally, the authors point out that the program's focus is based on pedagogical practices and strategies for engaging with rural students, families, and the community (Irvin et al., 2020).

Research suggests that the ability to understand the place and the relationship between the community and schools can result in successful teacher retention (Budge, 2006; Islam, 2012). Another component would be to challenge and dismiss stereotypical

depictions and mythical conceptions of rurality (Islam, 2012). Masinire et al. (2014) indicated that the first challenge in teacher education is to make sure teachers appreciate the rural space along with all of the complexity and diversity associated with the school. Masinire et al. (2014) added that the best way to accomplish this is to have the teachers experience the rural context for themselves. By having the students actively participate in activities where they have the chance to experience rural school districts, they will have the opportunity to witness the positive aspects of rural teaching and dissipate what they have been told. White and Kline (2012) argued that there is a need for a reconceptualization of the curriculum for teacher education and a more integrated approach to coursework and rural experience.

## **Policies**

Showalter et al. (2019) reported that more than 9.3 million students, or one in five students in the United States, attend rural school districts, and rural school districts comprise around half of all American schools (Johnson et al., 2014). With this portion of rural schools throughout the United States, it would seem that educational policy attention would be a priority for lawmakers. However, (Johnson et al., 2014) indicated that rural students and schools are often invisible because most leaders have not encountered the uniqueness of these communities; therefore, they lack a comprehensive understanding of rural school challenges. Rural schools are often overlooked when policymakers consider and develop educational plans despite the vast amount of rural students. Lyons (2009) described how most of the rural districts are located further from government centers; therefore, the voices of these individuals are less likely to be heard.

Additionally, significant inequalities in funding exist in public school districts. Johnson and Howley (2015) stated:

Federal policies that drive school improvement initiatives (e.g., those regulating the functioning of schools and those managing the distribution of resources to schools) are often not attentive to such differences, adopting a one-size-fits-all approach resulting in policy contexts that are ineffective and even harmful to rural schools and communities. (p. 224)

Johnson and Howley (2015) discussed how rural schools differ considerably from urban or suburban schools when it comes to culture, structures, and organizational systems.

Over the years, there has been much criticism from previous federal efforts, more specifically, federal policy and the failure to consider rural school districts (Eppley, 2009; Johnson & Howley, 2015).

Malhoit (2005) added that it is satirical that policymakers neglect rural schools in terms of educational adequacy since there is such a significant percentage of students attending rural schools. Policymakers need to tackle rural staffing challenges through a "rural lens," starting with gaining an understanding of the rural communities rather than rural schools trying to work with policies that are far from meeting their needs (Boylan, 2011; Wallace & Boylan, 2009).

State policy addressing the needs of rural school districts has also failed tremendously in gaining an understanding of the school and knowing what is required to provide quality education. State policy is often designed without having information on the actual differences in the cost of educating students in small rural schools (Malhoit, 2015). Additionally, rural schools regularly receive below-average funding because

property taxes are the primary source of income, and rural areas generally have below-average property values (Maiden & Stearns, 2007). Property wealth is the determinant of per-pupil expenditure, and it disproportionately benefits students living in wealthy school districts (Banicki & Murphy, 2014). Property taxes vary widely among the districts, and a penny of tax can bring in much more for an urban area school than a small, poor rural district. In an effort to reduce this inequality, lawmakers put into place the Foundation School Program (FSP). The FSP directs aid to districts with lesser property values, and the state recaptures revenue from wealthier property-value schools (TASB, 2022). However, per-pupil spending across the United States is far from being equitable. New York spent \$23,091 per pupil, while Texas was in the bottom 10%, with \$9,375 being spent per pupil (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Currently, Texas lawmakers determine a base number per student, and this has not been adjusted or increased in over a decade, despite the additional needs rural school students face (Wilder, 2023).

Significant inequalities in funding subsist in rural school districts nationally. Few federal policies are directly associated with rural schools, and the majority of initiatives are added to other legislation as a reconsideration (Johnson et al., 2014). The lack of attention given to rural school districts exacerbates the issues related to teacher recruitment and retention efforts. Stunningly, in a survey, 57% of policy insiders noted that rural education was indeed not essential to the U.S. Department of Education (Johnson et al., 2014). Additionally, Lavalley (2018) implied that rural school districts are studied much less, and the focus when it comes to education is mainly on metropolitan academics and policies. With such a large amount of our students being educated in rural schools, policymakers will have to address the inequalities that exist

between rural and non-rural school districts. Lavalley (2018) examined the barriers rural students face in managing academics and opportunities, as well as the federal and state policies that fail to consider rural teachers and students.

### **Positive Attributes**

Ylimaki et al. (2020) addressed the need to focus on the positive attributes of rural areas because rural school districts are often described from a deficit perspective.

Research suggests that there are many reasons teachers choose to work or remain in rural schools that are often not recognized, and the negative aspects often overshadow the positive attributes. These advantages include working with smaller class sizes (Ulferts, 2016; Ylimaki et al., 2020), strong administrative support (Ylimaki et al., 2020), maintaining a close relationship with students and teachers (Ylimaki et al., 2020), deep connections to the community (Hammer et al., 2005; Player, 2015; Ylimaki et al., 2020), increased prospects for accelerated leadership, lifestyle and the community (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015). Marketing the rural experience to potential employees by highlighting the advantages could potentially entice teachers to the district (Osterholm et al., 2006).

Much research has suggested that teachers are generally content with the class sizes and note that was one of the most advantageous aspects of rural teaching. Smaller class sizes are another benefit of working in a rural school district. Generally, there are lower student-to-teacher ratios; therefore, stronger, more trusting relationships are built between the teacher and student. Moreover, research has indicated that there are often fewer discipline issues due to the smaller amount of students enrolled. In an interview with a teacher, this statement was made, "Smaller class sizes, better peer community relationships that help promote more success among students... It's a more cohesive bond

in terms of being able to relate to parents, and parents being able to relate back to you" (Ylimaki et al., 2020, p. 38). With the smaller enrollment in the classes, teachers are provided the opportunity to offer the students more individualized instruction and attention. The opportunity for the teachers to get to know the students better is another attribute of the smaller classroom size (Ulferts, 2016; Ylimaki et al., 2020).

Strong administrative support has been another positive advantage in rural school districts. Ylimaki et al. (2020) posited that strong administrative support is necessary for continued teacher employment, particularly in rural schools that lack resources, instructional support, and professional development opportunities. Moreover, it is imperative to note that a teacher's perception of poor administration and leadership can have a direct impact on their decisions to stay or work at a rural school district. Teachers are less likely to choose to work or remain at a school where they feel they are not appreciated by the leaders (Stackhouse, 2011), and have pressure arise from poor communication, lack of support, and decreased decision-making opportunities (Hepburn & Brown, 2001). In an interview conducted by Ylimake et al. (2020), one teacher shared, "The administration is more supportive. With a smaller district, the district is more supportive" (p. 37). Additionally, Oyen and Schweinle (2020) proposed that strong administrative support leads to teaching proficiencies such as leadership, positive work environments, and adequate professional development.

Relationships that rural teachers are provided with to build with the community and students have been emphasized as an advantage to rural teaching. Established relationships that rural teachers obtain give them personal knowledge of their students, enabling them to engage in more individualized instruction (Beesley et al., 2010; Collins,



1999; Jimerson, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009). The potential value of being able to build community relationships and social cohesion is one highlight of rural teaching because enrollment is generally lower (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022). Furthermore, rural schools are “considered as having developed strong links to families and the local community, with teachers, parents, pupils and community members working hard together for their survival” (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022, p. 831). This type of connection to the community is one aspect that educators in larger districts cannot experience due to the high number of student enrollment. In an interview by Tran et al. (2020), they reported that teachers consistently shared the strong connections they have developed with the students and community and how it has positively affected them.

Because rural school districts experience difficulties in recruiting and retaining highly-qualified teachers, it would be beneficial for schools to focus on the benefits of rurality as recruitment and retention strategies. Lemke (1994) suggested centering recruiting efforts on attractive, small class sizes, sincere personal relationships, and a considerable influence in the decision-making process. In an interview conducted by Ylimaki et al. (2020), they found that when the participants were questioned on the advantages of rural areas, they responded with administrative support, a family-oriented environment, a solid network among teachers, smaller class sizes, and teacher autonomy.

Small rural districts tend to have few issues when it comes to discipline due to the much smaller enrollment numbers. Beesley et al. (2010) suggested that this attribute is necessary to advertise when sharing with applicants the amenities of rural school teaching. The reduced discipline concerns leave the teachers much less stressed and more capable of focusing on other areas. In a study by Beesley et al. (2010), a teacher stated

that principals report to potential teachers that their teachers experience less stress than teachers in more prominent districts. This is due to the smaller class sizes and a smaller amount of meetings and that their students have far fewer discipline problems because there is more support from the parents, and they feel that their children should be well-behaved.

### **Successful Strategies**

Rural concentrated research has identified strategies that have been proven to be successful in rural teacher recruitment and retention efforts. Financial incentives such as bonuses, stipends, housing grants, and tuition allowances have been found successful. Additionally, Grow Your Own programs are successful at staffing rural schools with qualified teachers.

### ***Financial Incentives***

The literature proposes that rural school districts would benefit from focusing on financial incentives to offset the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in the classroom. Irving et al. (2020) recommend that schools utilize bonuses, stipends, loan programs, and housing assistance to attract and retain teachers to their district. Ylimake et al. (2020) suggested that in order to recruit teachers who will remain in the school district, you must give a realistic job preview (RJP) by highlighting the advantages but also engage honestly in the rural challenges. RJP's have been used for decades to disseminate relevant information to applicants regarding job offers in order to better evaluate their prospects (Shibly, 2019). By using RJP's, school districts can potentially avoid having high teacher turnover rates by ensuring that the individual has received an accurate depiction of the rural teaching position. In order for RJP's to be successfully

implemented, the employer must consider (a) presenting messages in the employee's tone or staff word of mouth (Liu et al., 2016), (b) genuine, experienced-based job information with positive and negative aspects that may be presented to the employee (Premack & Wanous, 1985), and (c) ensuring the information source/commutation is considered credible (Liu et al., 2016). Research has shown that using RJs can strengthen the number of candidates by appealing to their intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors (Tran et al., 2020).

In order to combat teacher shortages, school districts have relied on financial incentives, including housing subsidies, tuition for teachers changing fields, loan forgiveness, and scholarship programs for prospective teachers (Martin, 2007). Rural districts could benefit from offering some type of financial incentive when recruiting and retaining teachers. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) posited to address the issue of staffing rural schools with quality teachers that educational specialists must considerably invest by providing financial incentives to these individuals. The idea behind financial incentives or bonuses is that teachers will be more willing to come to a rural school and also will remain within the district. With rural districts facing budget constraints, financial incentives should be used to attract teachers to the school district. They should be targeted to hard-to-fill positions, such as math, science, and special education (Player, 2015). There is also research suggesting that offering incentives to retired teachers to return to the profession could assist in addressing teacher shortages (Aragon, 2018). However, within the placement of Senate Bill 202, school districts can no longer share the responsibility of the Teacher Retirement System surcharge with the retiree through payroll reduction. The districts will now have to absorb the cost rather than pass it on to

the retiree as before, which will put a financial strain on many small, rural school districts (Dooley, 2021).

Reportedly, teachers earn about 30% less than other college graduates, and offering a loan forgiveness incentive to recent college graduates could attract them to rural districts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Thus, making a career choice in education much less appealing to college graduates who are often inundated with student loan debt and seeking to make as much money as possible to reduce the debt they have accrued throughout their college career. Loan forgiveness programs will pay all or a portion of the teacher's student loan debt if they meet the criteria, and this is the most common strategy rural districts employ (Bueno & Sass, 2019). Loan forgiveness programs usually decrease after some time for their public service within the district (Kirshtein et al., 2004).

Feng and Sass (2017) investigated the effects of Florida's Critical Teacher Shortage program. The program provided loan forgiveness to qualifying teachers in order to measure the efficacy of non-wage compensation schemes on teacher recruitment and retention and, for a short time, offered retention bonuses. Their study found that the loan forgiveness program decreased teacher attrition; however, the effects varied by the subject area being taught. The findings of Feng and Sass (2017) suggested that high school teachers who were offered a one-time retention bonus of \$1200 decreased teacher attrition in targeted areas by as much as 25%. It was also suggested that relatively modest incentives of \$500 to \$1000 per year have been shown to reduce attrition in some hard-to-staff positions; however, in special education, the results indicated that only \$2500 appears effective. Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) posited that loan forgiveness programs

have proven to be a vastly effective tool in recruiting teachers to high-need subject areas and specific geographic locations.

Bueno and Sass (2019) studied the effects of Georgia's statewide salary differential pay program to determine the impact of differential pay on teacher retention and recruitment in both the long and short run. The program had three requirements to be eligible: they had to be teaching science or math, they had to be certified in the subject area, and they had to have less than 6 years of service. Through their research, they found that Georgia's differential pay system has substantially decreased attrition rates for secondary science and math teachers within the state. However, their study indicated that incentive pay would not likely change students' minds to switch to education if they are pursuing a different career (Bueno & Sass, 2019).

Moreover, Springer et al. (2016) analyzed Tennessee's Retention Bonus program that was put in place to combat the increasing rates of teacher turnover in low-performing schools. They targeted high-priority schools, and the participants who were eligible to participate could apply for a \$5,000 retention bonus. Their finding indicated that there is a positive relationship between financial incentives and teacher attrition rates. However, they do specify that because the Tennessee Retention Bonus Program was unannounced, a significant number of teachers from the state had already made the determination to transfer or leave the profession (Springer et al., 2016).

### ***Quality Recruitment and Retention Strategies***

Another incentive that research indicates is a good recruitment and retention strategy is to provide housing assistance or location-specific incentives. McClure and Reeves (2004) argued that incentives other than salary need to target local challenges,

and for rural areas, suitable housing is also an issue. An example of a targeted nonsalary incentive is in Mississippi, where they offer an Employer-Assisted Housing Teacher Program. This program provides interest-free loans to certified teachers in areas where there is a grave shortage, as well as a loan repayment program for rural teachers in the state (Monk, 2007). Location-specific incentives such as affordable housing, mortgage assistance, reduced interest rates, free utility hook-ups, and assistance with moving expenses were also provided (Beesley et al., 2010; Elliott, 2008; Osterholm et al., 2006; Rowland & Coble, 2005).

While there is little research that determines the extent to which financial incentives play a role in an individual's decision to apply or stay in a rural district, there are studies that disclose there is a positive effect on the decision, but to what magnitude is unknown. Podolsky et al. (2016) suggested that even though financial incentives have increased the number of teachers and decreased turnover in rural, high-poverty schools, they have proven unsuccessful at long-term sustainability. Even though the bonuses have not been successful, the factors regarding the climate of the school and the quality of the leadership were not discussed.

### ***Grow Your Own (GYO)***

Research suggests that one way that rural school districts can combat the ongoing teacher recruitment and retention crisis is to focus on the current rural students and implement a GYO educator program. Grow Your Own programs are defined as "highly collaborative, community-rooted, intensive supports for recruiting, preparing, placing, and retaining diverse classroom teachers" (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019, p. 27). There are a

variety of GYO programs that vary in terms of recruitment strategies, financial assistance, curriculum, and partnerships (Jessen et al., 2020).

Additionally, research on this topic is expected to have a significant expansion in the upcoming years if policy interest and recommendations are coordinated with financial institutional obligations in educator preparation programs (Gist, 2019). Children who were raised in rural locations have experienced barriers, will grow up and often remain in the community, and this talent should be developed and nurtured (Lavalley, 2018). According to Lavalley (2018), a teaching community usually has close ties to the community, and 80% of teachers will remain less than 15 miles from their hometown when in search of employment, which has popularized a GYO program for many schools. The goal of GYO programs is to address teacher shortages and retention issues and increase diversity among teachers, which will aim to recruit teachers locally to increase the candidate pool (Valenzuela, 2017). These programs are all designed differently. Some recruits from the college level, middle or high school, and even paraprofessionals are targeted (Skinner et al., 2011). The aim is to target these students at a young age in an effort to recruit them to want to return after college to teach at the school where they graduated from.

In 2005, Illinois became the first state to fund and implement a competitive GYO program designed to create partnerships to prepare educators in the community (Garcia, 2022). This program has successfully helped more than 1,000 students become teachers in rural low-income school districts. This community-based teacher education program offers mentorships, financial support, and counseling (Coffey et al., 2019). After many years of funding this program, they have made the decision to expand it to increase the

pool of teachers to help negate the issue of teacher shortages. Programs in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina stated their aim was to develop local talent and increasing the talent in the pool of teachers (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

To combat the teacher shortages, TEA Commissioner, Mike Morath, implemented a GYO program in Texas in 2018. The program's goal is to enhance the teaching profession by offering high-quality education at the high school level and to create teacher pipelines to increase the teacher pool and diversity in future educators (Garza, 2020). The TEA will competitively award grants to applicants who assist in resolving teacher recruitment and retention issues, especially in rural and small settings that are hard to staff. There is a limit of two participants per high school, with the current teacher shortage rate, which seems to be somewhat low. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2018), California reported they had about 8.5% of teachers leave the profession or state each year, driving them to fund a 45 million dollar program to support 2250 teachers' aides earn their degrees to become a teacher. California's Paraprofessional Teacher Training program successfully recruited racially and linguistically diverse individuals to become certified teachers.

Carothers et al. (2019) examined the effects of a public university in Southwest Florida that works with several school districts and their collaboration to recruit students into teacher preparation programs. They found that although the collaboration is still in the early stages, there are positive effects, and the programs have begun to expand by offering dual-credit options. Currently, Wyoming is the only state that has not implemented a GYO program to reduce teacher shortages. In Mississippi, a task force was created to examine their GYO teacher preparation program to address teacher



shortages primarily targeting special education (Jessen et al., 2020). The goal of the program is to recruit immigrant community members as teachers and provide them with scholarships. Moreover, Northwest University in Washington implemented a GYO program that has been successful as well. This program is an alternative route to online certification that integrates field experiences. It is provided to students who are thirty or more miles away from a campus that offers a teacher preparation program. It is aimed at paraprofessionals who were currently employed within a school district (Jessen et al., 2020).

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to examine how rural school districts are successful in teacher recruitment and retention. The qualitative research method is most suitable when unknown information needs to be acknowledged (Riessman, 2008). Qualitative research includes data that is in the form of words and is non-numerical while focusing on as much detail as possible (Blaxter et al., 2010; Busetto et al., 2020). Groves et al. (2012) explained qualitative research as a systematic and subjective method to describe everyday life experiences and additionally give them meaning. This study aimed to explore rural teachers' perceptions and experiences in rural districts and what factors attracted them to the school and why they decided to remain.

Using a qualitative research approach has several advantages. First, it provides a detailed depiction of the participants' experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Secondly, the qualitative approach provides a holistic view of human experiences in certain settings, encompassing a broader range of epistemological viewpoints, and interpretive techniques

to better understand human experiences. Thirdly, qualitative research has the ability to understand different people's viewpoints and meanings of events. Fourthly, there are direct interactions with the participants, resulting in detailed subjective data. Finally, qualitative research is a flexible structure that allows the researcher the opportunity to understand complex issues easier (Rahman, 2020). Thus, a qualitative research method is more appropriate than a quantitative method for this study.

The qualitative strategy that was used was an exploratory case study. The value of an exploratory case study is to gain insights that are not obtainable by traditional quantitative methods (Radojevich-Kelley & Hoffman, 2012). Exploratory case studies employ various sources of evidence to analyze phenomena within their real context (Yin, 1992). Additionally, exploratory case studies are appropriate for doing one-on-one interviews with participants. In this study, I explored insight from teachers on rural school recruitment and retention strategies. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the researcher and the study participants in this exploratory case to gain more access to the aspects that led teachers to work and remain at rural school districts.

### **Study Population**

This study utilized purposeful sampling to gather meaningful data in this study. Purposeful sampling intentionally samples a group of people that can provide the most valuable information to the researcher about the research problem being examined (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Therefore, the participants in this study were intentionally selected based on specific criteria. For the purpose of this study, rural schools were defined as having an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state, and an enrollment growth rate of less than 20% over the past 5 years (TEA,

2023). These teachers had knowledge regarding the research topic due to their experience at a rural school and firsthand knowledge of what attracted them to the school and what factors have been successful in their retention.

This study collected data via focused-group interviews. There were two focus groups, with six participants in each group. One group consisted of novice teachers who had 5 years or less experience in rural school districts. The second group consisted of veteran teachers who had been teaching in a rural school district for more than 5 years. The group of novice teachers was able to provide the study with a fresh, new outlook on the challenges of rural teacher recruitment and retention. Additionally, the veteran teachers were able to provide insight from their many years of teaching in rural schools.

Focus groups were chosen because they offer the encouragement of new ideas, flexibility in the questions being asked, and the participants provide enhanced opinions. Additionally, focus groups provide the flexibility to dive deeper into issues that could arise during the discussion, preconceived notions can be addressed, and potentially uncover ideas that may not have been considered but are important to the participants (SIS International Research, n.d). In order to recruit participants, an invitation was sent to rural school superintendents requesting participant nominees. Once these nominees were determined, a recruitment email was sent to the potential participants asking for their participation in the study. When the participants agreed, another email was sent to them containing the letter of consent to participate in the focus-group interview. Additionally, a pre-survey was emailed to the participants to gather initial information and demographic data. Table 1 reflects the participants in the study.

**Table 1***Participant Information*

Participant Name* (Pseudonyms)	How many years have you been teaching?	How many years have you been teaching on your current campus?	How many years have you been serving under your campus principal?	How many students do you serve?	What grade level do you teach?
N1	2	2	2	14	1st
N2	1	1	1	14	Kindergarten
N3	1	1	1	19	Pre-Kindergarten
V1	21	1	1	34	K-5 Sped
V2	11	4	4	7	PK-12 Life skills
V3	19	3	3	16	1 <sup>st</sup>
V4	11	1	1	16	2 <sup>nd</sup>

Note: In the pseudonyms, N represents novice teachers and the V represents veteran teachers.

**Study Setting**

The school district that was used in this study is geographically located in a rural town with a population of approximately 2,300. There is one campus that houses pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The district employs around 60 teachers and the student/teacher ratio is 10:1. The majority of the students are considered at risk and more than 75% of the students are economically disadvantaged (TAPR, 2022).

**Data Collection**

Prior to the interviews, a pre-survey was sent to the participants. The purpose of the survey was to gather demographic data prior to the focus group discussion. Another purpose of the pre-survey was to gather specific data in advance in order to focus all the time in the focus group discussion on the interview questions. This survey helped to maximize my time with the study's participants. An example of the questions that were

asked during the interview were: a) How long have you been teaching? b) How long have you been teaching on your present campus? c) Why did you choose to teach in a rural school?

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews using focus group discussions. Focus groups are a type of qualitative research methodology that consists of structured discussions with small groups that produce qualitative data on a specific topic of interest through the use of open-ended questions (Masadeh, 2012). The goal of this focus group gathering was to collect data from the personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants (Hayward et al., 2004; Israel et al., 1998; Morgan, 1996). Acocella (2012) stated, “Focus groups are constituted so as to achieve two main aims: firstly, to facilitate interaction among participants; secondly, to maximize the collection of high-quality information in the little time available” (p. 1127). The interviews were facilitated by establishing an atmosphere conducive to self-disclosure by building a positive rapport with the participants by expressing compassion and diplomacy. Building a rapport is important for the facilitation process to ensure the participants are comfortable, and it will improve their willingness to answer openly and honestly (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). Attention was given to non-verbal cues signally that the participants are uncomfortable or have something to say, and they will be addressed. All participants were encouraged to participate and share their reflections and opinions. Additionally, open-ended questions were asked. All members of the focus group were given the opportunity to share their thoughts and sentiments to provide valuable information. Focus group discussions were used to determine the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools. A disadvantage of conducting focus groups is the

possibility that the participants may not be comfortable about voicing their opinions freely (Somekh, 2020). Taking this into consideration, the participants were asked prior and after the focus group, if they would prefer to have a one-on-one interview.

Semi-structured interviews facilitate engaging conversations between the participants. Additionally, semi-structured interviews will allow the participants to contribute to conversations that provide rich data to the researcher (Sanker & Jones, 2007). The focus groups' discussions took 60 to 90 minutes and took place via ZOOM conference call. The discussions were recorded in order to provide the researcher the opportunity to transcribe, take notes, and determine if a follow-up interview was necessary.

### **Data Analysis**

At the completion of the interviews, the transcripts were gathered and analyzed. This study utilized *The Framework Method* by Gale et al. (2013) to analyze the data results. The procedure of data analysis identified seven stages. The first stage is the transcription of the interview data. Gale et al. (2013) stated that the transcription of data is a good opportunity for the researcher to become immersed in the data. The second stage is familiarization with the interview. Gale et al. (2013) argued that becoming familiar with the entire interview through either recordings or transcripts is a vital part of the interpretation. The third stage is coding, which identifies relevant themes and the relationships between them. The codes could refer to the participants' values, emotions, or behaviors (Gale et al., 2013).

Developing a working analytical framework is the fourth stage in the process. This involves the process of comparing codes and grouping them together based on

similarities (Gale et al., 2013). Applying the analytical framework is the fifth step. This involves applying the working analytical framework by indexing previous transcripts and using the active codes and categories (Gale et al., 2013). The sixth stage includes charting data into the framework matrix. Gale et al. stated, “Charting involves summarizing the data by category from each transcript” (p. 5). The seventh and final stage is interpreting the data. This includes mapping characteristics and identifying the differences between the data (Gale et al., 2013).

## **Findings**

### **Rural Teacher Recruitment & Retention**

The first two research questions were regarding the challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas. The themes intersected within these two questions. These themes were pay, rural geographic location, and resources.

#### ***Pay***

The first theme that was accentuated by the teachers was the challenge of low salaries when recruiting teachers to rural schools. The teachers expressed the low pay as a significant challenge for rural school districts. VT1 mentioned how rural schools have lower salaries and do not always have incentives or bonuses. This is not always attractive to new hires. VT2 stated, “There are not any raises, and there is no retention pay either.” VT3 indicated that there were no stipends offered for those individuals with advanced degrees such as a doctorate. NT1 indicated how they could see pay to be an issue in recruiting by stating the following:

I think pay is a challenge for recruiting teachers for rural schools, but maybe not so much for newer teachers because they are just starting out. I personally did not

have a problem with the pay, but I have seen teachers leave to go to urban districts for a pay increase, but it would be nice to get paid more.

NT2 indicated that she would leave if a higher salary was important to her. She was content with her rural school and did not care to leave. NT3 mentioned that she could not see someone from outside of the area wanting to come to a rural school district because the pay was much lower than in other surrounding districts.

In the analysis of the data, the theme of pay was also seen as a challenge for retaining teachers in rural school districts. NT3 mentioned that she previously left nursing, but she may eventually return because she could work fewer hours and make more money. VT1 mentioned that increasing salaries would help retain teachers in rural areas. VT2 stated:

It can be a challenge to retain teachers if they are struggling because of the low pay. Also, if this is their only income for their family, you aren't going to keep them. It really depends on your personal situation. Additionally, if the money is already low here and the administration is bad, you go where the money is.

Moreover, VT3 indicated that if the administration was bad and money was low, teachers would leave.

### ***Rural Location***

The rural location is an issue for both recruiting and retaining teachers. The teachers, both novice and veteran, provided detailed responses that the rural area could be a challenge in recruiting and retaining teachers. One major challenge due to the isolated location was inconsistent internet connections. NT1 stated, "The Wi-Fi goes out often, and so does the power; that makes it difficult because a lot of lessons have videos that go



with them.” NT2 indicated that if the Wi-Fi did not improve, they could see teachers leaving for a larger, less isolated school. NT3 mentioned the following:

The classroom technology goes out a lot. In the larger urban district, about 15 minutes from here, their internet never goes out because they are not as isolated. It’s a safety thing when the Wi-Fi goes out because the doors won’t lock, and if some outsider knew that in today’s society, it could be an issue.

VT1 stated, “The buildings are older and in their current state; they are not equipped to handle technology, and it’s a big issue.” Additionally, VT3 indicated that technology is the biggest issue, and if the power goes out, they have to open the doors to get light into the classroom to be able to teach. VT3 mentioned that they did not know how bad the technology was at the rural school until after they started working there. NT2 indicated that isolation could be a challenge in recruiting teachers by stating:

I grew up in a big city, so it was a shock being here with only one school and a gas station. This type of location can be a challenge for those who grew up in larger areas. We used to be able to ‘Door Dash’ food to our school or walk to a restaurant. Now, if I forget my food, the only options are the school cafeteria or ‘gas station pizza’.

In addition, NT3 shared that they grew up in this location, so they knew what to expect, but they could see where it could be a problem and an adjustment for someone not familiar with the rural lifestyle. VT1 stated, “We are in the middle of nowhere; there are not many options for going out to get food.

## ***Resources***

The lack of resources is challenging when recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas. These resources include financial, classroom supplies, and poor facilities. The teachers expressed that classroom resources were limited, and they often had to use their own funds. NT1 mentioned that they had to pay money out of their own pocket to provide resources for their students to have a decent lesson because the resources were not available. Moreover, NT2 stated, “As a first-year teacher, I have spent a lot of money on general supplies for my classroom.” VT1 stated:

Unless you have taught in a small school district, you are not aware of what goes on; it’s not something you think about asking. The assumption is that you will have everything you need. You go in expecting to have to purchase small things here and there, like pencils and paper. You don’t go in thinking you won’t have enough of the same books to be able to teach the students.

VT2 mentioned that it was more of an afterthought, and you do not know initially what supplies you will have or what you need, and it could be frustrating not to have the resources to teach the students. VT3 indicated, “I struggled to get reading books to teach my kids how to read, and you need different leveled books to teach first grade to read.” Moreover, she stated that it took her a year to get the books she needed for her classroom, and they were donated to her. VT4 mentioned that you assume that you will have all the resources you need, but if you have taught at a rural school, you realize that sometimes, you simply do not have the resources you need. You learn how to modify and adapt.

The facilities were also pointed out by the teachers as a challenge to recruiting and retaining teachers. NT1 stated, “It would be hard if someone drove up here and saw

the aging buildings, especially if they came from a suburban area that had new schools.” NT2 mentioned, “If someone was given the choice to work at a newer urban school with all the ‘bells and whistles’ or at a rural school with older facilities, they would probably choose the urban school.”

NT3 stated, “If new teachers walk in and see the facilities where I work, they would probably turn around and leave. The hallways haven’t even been painted since it opened.” Additionally, she indicated that if a new teacher drove up and saw that the old school was built in the 1930s, they would probably question working there. First impressions are important. VT1 mentioned that the buildings were much older, and little had been done as far as maintenance care. VT2 added that the buildings were old and had issues, but funds were not available to replace them. It is important to note that the veteran teachers and the novice teachers had many commonalities, but there were a few differences also. The veteran teachers seemed to focus on uncertified teachers being placed in the classrooms due to districts of innovation and the importance of strong administration. While the novice teachers focused on the importance of salary being the main contributor to teacher recruitment and retention.

### **Possible Solutions**

The final research question explored the possible solutions to the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools. The themes that reflected this question were pay, rural school exposure, and administrative support.

#### ***Pay***

The teachers shared that increasing pay for teachers in rural school districts was a possible solution in an effort to recruit and retain teachers. NT1 stated that money is the

biggest solution for obtaining and keeping teachers. She added that she had to put a lot of money into her classroom for decorations and lessons. She mentioned that her paycheck was so low that if she had to take a child to daycare, then her entire paycheck would go to pay for daycare. NT2 added that “teachers don’t get paid enough already; I understand why some teachers leave to teach at a nonrural school; the pay is just better.” NT3 indicated that an increase in pay was the number one thing to recruit and retain teachers in a rural school. VT2 stated:

More money would get teachers to come and stay here. Retention bonuses and incentives would be a good solution for retaining teachers. Monetary rewards around the holidays would be good since we are already stressing about money.

Having extra money to buy for our families because most of us spend money on our students here.

Moreover, VT4 mentioned that money and retention bonuses would be good, but “the issue with bonuses is you do not know if the funds will be available next year.”

### ***Rural School Exposure***

The participants emphasized the importance of preparing teachers for rural settings. NT1 indicated that her teacher preparation program, did not prepare her at all for rural teaching, and it ultimately instilled fear into her because she felt like she would not have any support. NT2, who was prepared by an online alternative certification program, mentioned that the topic of rural had not been addressed, and she had to basically prepare herself for teaching in a rural school. She also indicated, “They [teacher preparation program] don’t prepare teachers about the unique challenges of rural schools, and it can

be a shock to some teachers who are not prepared for it.” Additionally, NT3, who was also certified through an online alternative certification program, stated:

There was no preparation for rural teaching. There were no lessons n rural schools and nothing about small classes. They didn’t prepare you for the fact that you had to use your own money for your classroom or any of the other challenges that rural schools present.

VT1 explained that educator programs need to expose the students to rural districts because they are only familiar with larger schools. VT2 stated, “Teachers go to larger schools because that is what they know, and they are not aware of what they are missing in the smaller districts.” VT3 mentioned that she thinks it matters if you grew up in a small school, because you are aware of the rural area and you want to remain in that type of environment. VT4 mentioned that your preference for teaching location depends on your personal perception, and some people like the “small hometown feel.”

The teachers suggested that teacher candidates be placed in rural schools for their student teacher placements. This will help with their knowledge of the culture of rural schools. NT1 indicated that her student teaching was in a Title 1 school with large classes and limited funds. She felt that this helped her understand the lack of funding that rural schools experience. VT1 stated:

We need to have teacher candidates out here when they are student teaching and let them see small districts because teacher preparation programs do not always do that. There are some distinct differences between rural and non-rural schools. If we leveled the playing field a little bit and they have to spend some time in a rural school, it would make a big difference in the new teacher’s expectations.

VT2 expressed, “When teachers arrive, they aren’t prepared. Teacher preparation programs don’t place their teacher candidates in the classroom enough, and they are not prepared for rural teaching.” VT3 stated that they [teacher preparation programs] really need to place candidates in rural schools for their student teaching. Additionally, VT4 agreed that they need to student teach in rural areas because once they get into the rural schools, they realize it is much harder than they anticipated.

### ***Administrative Support***

The teachers expressed multiple times the importance of strong administrative support and how it helps the challenges of rural school teaching become more acceptable. NT1 indicated that the location of a school is not that important if you really want to work at a specific place. Additionally, NT2 stated, “If the administration is supportive, it is hard to feel isolated.” VT1 expressed that deciding where to teach and if you want to stay basically comes down to a supportive administration; it can be even more important than the pay. VT2 indicated:

A strong administration is the key to teacher retention. If my current administration leaves, then I’m leaving because there are a lot of principals who just do not care. A bad administration will make you stay or leave a school.

Moreover, VT3 expressed that because the administration was so supportive, she could deal with the unfavorable working conditions. She also added that if the administration takes the time to care and not walk around like “superiors,” that makes a big difference; “teachers will want to stay.” VT4 indicated, “The money didn’t really matter once she got to her school. Knowing that she was supported by the administration was a really big deal.”

## **Discussion**

### **Summary**

This study provided a contribution to the research available on examining the unique challenges rural school districts face when it pertains to the recruitment and retention of teachers. Rural schools cannot contend with the larger districts that provide competitive salaries, access to additional resources, and more geographically appealing locations. Hammer et al. (2005) argued that it is not surprising that rural school districts have struggled with teacher recruitment and retention because there is limited confidence in targeted incentives or relocation and housing assistance. It is critical to investigate effective strategies to successfully recruit and retain high-quality teachers in rural school districts. This research aimed to investigate the factors that novice and veteran rural teachers perceived as challenges with the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools. Additionally, this research serves as an essential resource to provide beneficial information to rural school districts. The participants elaborated in depth on the possible solutions for rural schools on successful teacher recruitment and retention. Given the findings, the seven rural teachers provided common challenges to rural teacher recruitment and retention as well as possible solutions.

### **Conclusion**

This study answered three research questions regarding the recruitment and retention of teachers in a rural setting. This study revealed three themes in the aid for answering the questions. These themes included pay, rural location, and resources. In addition, possible solutions to the retention and recruitment challenges in rural schools were identified as increased pay, rural school exposure, and strong administrative support.

### ***Research Questions***

**What are the challenges of recruiting teachers to teach in Texas rural school districts?** This study found that the challenges of recruiting teachers to rural schools in Texas were pay, rural location, and lack of resources. Rural schools face unique challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, including lower salaries, geographic isolation, difficult working conditions, limited resources, lack of benefits, and limited professional growth opportunities (Beesley et al., 2010; Giles, 2020; Hammer et al., 2005; Podolsky et al., 2017). The rural teachers in this study suggested that the lower pay in rural schools was a significant factor when it came to rural schools. They indicated that pay is much lower, and there are very few incentives or bonuses compared to the larger school districts. Teachers in this study supported the literature by confirming the challenges of rural teacher recruitment and retention. Pan (2006) alluded to a significant difference in the pay gap between rural, suburban, and urban districts, with the gap even being as high as 18%.

The teachers also suggested that the rural location was an issue for recruiting and retaining teachers. The rural location affected their ability to use technology because the Wi-Fi was not always accessible or reliable. Furthermore, teachers in this study suggested that the lack of resources available in rural school districts was challenging, and they often were required to use their own funds for their classrooms. The teachers shared that the facilities were dated and in need of upgrades. They stated if a teacher showed up to interview, after seeing the facilities, they would probably turn around and leave because it was not appealing. The literature supported these findings by stating that school districts that are geographically isolated have more substantial challenges attracting



teachers to the area (Hammer et al., 2005). Small rural schools say that resources are declining, and they are forced to do more with less because the funding is inadequate, leaving them lacking the necessities to provide a good education (Starr & White, 2008).

**What are the challenges of retaining teachers in rural school districts in Texas?** This study indicated that lower salaries, rural location, and lack of resources are determined to be challenges for rural schools in retaining teachers in Texas. The teachers shared common thoughts on the lower salaries being a challenge for keeping teachers in rural districts. Ingersoll (2004) indicated that a majority of individuals who choose to leave small rural schools reportedly did so because of poor salaries. The teachers also shared that rural locations can be a challenge, especially if you are not familiar with the area. They stated that it was often a shock for teachers relocating from a suburban area where there are plenty of restaurants.

The teacher turnover rate also tends to be higher in rural schools due to the isolation of the location and the adjustments needed to live in these areas (Lavalley, 2018). Additionally, teachers expressed that limited resources can often be challenging in retaining teachers in rural locations. The participants shared that they had to spend their own money on resources for their classrooms. Additionally, they indicated that teachers from suburban areas may decide to leave because of the lack of resources and outdated facilities. Hellsten et al. (2011) indicated that having inadequate material available to teachers creates further stress on their demanding workload. Additionally, Monk (2007) stated that teachers often find enticing opportunities in non-rural locations capable of providing better resources than in rural districts.

**What are possible solutions to the challenges of the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural school districts in Texas?** This study showed that increased pay, rural school exposure, and administrative support were possible solutions to the challenges of recruitment and retention in Texas rural school districts. The literature implied that starting teachers are more likely to teach in certain areas when the salaries are higher (Jimerson, 2003; Lankford et al., 2002; Loeb & Myung, 2020; Malhoit, 2005; Murnane & Olsen, 1990). The teachers shared that increasing pay for rural school districts would help recruit and retain teachers because they are paid less than non-rural schools. They indicated that more money and retention bonuses would help attract teachers as well as keep them at the rural schools.

The teachers shared that rural schools do not receive enough exposure. They emphasized the importance of teacher preparation programs preparing their candidates by sending them to student teach in rural districts. Azano and Stewart (2016) posited that teacher education programs should explore the nuanced intricacies of rural education and be provided with meaningful field experiences. Rural social space could be beneficial when considering staffing problems because it exposes the pre-service teachers to the space; they can experience rural teaching personally rather than not being able to see beyond the stereotypes or rurality (Reid et al., 2010).

The teachers also shared the importance of strong administrative support and how it allowed the challenges they faced to become more acceptable. They expressed how administrative support was the most important factor when deciding to remain at a job. They indicated that this support was even more important than the pay. Moreover, the teachers shared that by having strong administrative support, they could deal with

unfavorable working conditions. Ylimaki et al. (2020) suggested that strong administrative support was required for continued teacher employment, especially in rural schools that have limited resources, instructional support, and professional development opportunities.

This study supported the challenges and possible solutions that rural school districts face when recruiting and retaining teachers in the district. The teachers in this study confirmed that pay, rural location, and limited resources were challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers to rural schools. Additionally, they also confirmed that possible solutions were increased pay, rural school exposure, and administrative support.

### **Implications**

The findings in this study serve as a beneficial resource for school leaders to understand the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools, as well as providing possible solutions to the challenges. Findings suggested the need to increase rural teacher salaries in order to successfully recruit and retain teachers to rural districts. Additionally, attention should be given to state and federal policies that could increase teacher salaries. There is a need to create policies that will support merit pay, signing bonuses, and retention bonuses. Furthermore, allowing budget allocations to help rural schools improve their facilities and technology capacities are recommended.

Moreover, local budgets need to be analyzed to find more funding for teacher salaries, facility improvements, and technology resources. The school districts could create community partnerships that could help serve the teachers by allowing special discounts such as gas and food discounts and providing donations for classroom supplies. Additionally, rural schools could encourage teacher preparation programs to create

teaching units that prepare candidates for rural schools, as well as placing candidates in rural classrooms for their student teaching placements. Rural school leaders could provide stipends for peer teacher recruitment. If a teacher successfully recruited a fellow teacher to the district, they could receive a pre-determined stipend amount. This would encourage teachers to recruit teachers to the district because they are offered an incentive.

This study supported the theoretical framework of the “push/pull” theory. It is important for school leaders to understand the details and the importance of this theory and how it applies to teachers in rural areas. Administrators should acknowledge that teachers were pulled to stay in their rural setting because they felt supported by their administration and they enjoyed the rural culture. However, reality sets in when they are driven out of the rural setting due to uncontrolled demands such as poor salaries, resources, and isolation. Understanding the cause and effects of the push/pull theory will help administrators be able to set their priorities in recruiting and retaining teachers.

This research study suggests future recommendations for future studies. Perhaps it would be interesting to see how rural teachers, both veteran and novice, adjust to the urban setting, which is much larger, densely populated, with a diverse population, in order to examine their retention rates. Additionally, a quantitative study that quantifies the factors of what makes a teacher come to a rural school and what makes them stay at a rural school may be beneficial. Furthermore, expanding this study to a state level approach where more teachers from different rural schools are interviewed would be of benefit to the study.

## **Strength and Limitations**

This study followed through a qualitative research design that allowed participants to elaborate and provide detailed discussions. By using a qualitative design, teachers were interviewed, and they provided their thoughts, which added depth and allowed the researcher to dig deeper, which a quantitative study would not allow. By using focus groups, teachers were able to relax more because they were with their peers, and they could also feed off each other to provide beneficial information.

There were several limitations involved in this study. For example, only one rural school district was interviewed, as opposed to several rural districts. Perhaps it would be beneficial to find additional districts that are more geographically isolated and obtain their thoughts. Additionally, the timing of the study limited the number of participants that were interviewed. Since the interviews were held at the beginning of the summer, the teachers were no longer at school. There were only two focus groups with a total of seven members. Perhaps more participants would provide insight into the challenges and solutions of rural teacher recruitment and retention.

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