Helping New Teachers Stay and Thrive in Rural Schools

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Abstract

Among the many challenges facing rural administrators, recruiting and retaining teachers is often at the top of the list. Given the time and energy invested to successfully attract, recruit, and hire a new teacher, there is a significant need to adopt strategies that will help to retain new rural teachers. Rural administrators can support new teachers so that they stay—and thrive—in rural districts by connecting teachers with the community, supporting place-based practices in the classroom, and helping new teachers build relationships both in and out of school.

KEYWORDS: rural, teacher, recruitment, retention, community, connection, place-based

A few simple strategies can help teachers feel connected to their communities, motivating them to stay and succeed as rural educators.

Cecilia Romero-Robles initially thought of Hamilton City, California, as a "desolate" place with "nothing to offer" (Romero-Robles, 2018). As she learned about the community and found its "heartbeats," her initial impressions were shattered. She discovered a rich culture, a local market that provides the community with much more than just fresh goods, and, importantly, a welcoming and proud rural place. She learned about the local high school and its highly regarded athletic and agriculture programs, as well as its deeply committed teaching staff. Learning about Hamilton City's history helped her gain a further appreciation for the community, and discovering the community's many assets reinforced her commitment to using a place-based approach in her teaching. (Read more about her and other rural teachers at iamaruralteacher.org.)

Every year, across the country, many teachers choose to move to rural communities and teach in rural schools. They are drawn to these areas for any number of reasons — their natural beauty, opportunities for outdoor recreation, limited traffic, low crime rates, and so on. And they recognize

that rural schools can offer a chance to be part of a smaller community where teachers can get to know students and their families and enjoy more opportunities for autonomy or leadership.

For more than a century, however, rural school districts have struggled to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of educators (Azano, Downey, & Brenner, 2019; Biddle & Azano, 2016). In addition to geographic remoteness, new teachers, particularly those who did not grow up a rural community, might also be influenced by popular media representations of rural communities as backwards, out of touch, and dull. Romero-Robles put in the extra effort to explore and learn about Hamilton City; however, many teachers may not have the time or know-how to challenge their own (or others') deficit-based assumptions about rural life. This is in addition to the reality that current funding formulas make it difficult for rural schools to offer competitive teacher salaries and provide the school and classroom resources that teachers might expect. Moreover, higher poverty rates in rural areas can mean that students and families are struggling, and teachers may feel ill-prepared to support students facing these challenges. Additionally, distance from more urban amenities (such as airports, concert venues, and specialized medical care) can cause aspiring teachers to worry about being isolated.

Over time, many rural administrators have polished their recruiting messages, emphasizing the many benefits of working in a rural school. But even if they are successful in attracting and hiring new teachers, they still face the challenge of retaining them. National data in 2012-13 found that on average, rural schools had higher teacher attrition rates (8.4%) than city, suburban, and town schools (6.4 - 7.9%) (Goldring et al., 2014) as well as some of the highest rates of teacher turnover (e.g., 14.7% in the rural South) (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, et al., 2018).

With up to 44% of new teachers leaving the field within the first 3-5 years of teaching (Ingersoll, et al., 2018), rural school leaders need to find ways to break out of this recurring cycle of recruiting new teachers and losing them a few years later, and help them put down roots and thrive as educators and community members (Azano et al., 2021). We see a lot of promise in comprehensive place-conscious strategies for recruitment and retention, and we are optimistic that they will prove to be especially helpful in retaining teachers who are early in their career and new to rural life.

Comprehensive and place-conscious induction strategies

We have spoken with countless rural educators who, like Cecilia Romero-Robles, had misconceptions about rural places, or who, like us, have rural backgrounds and have always questioned those misconceptions. Educators tend to be well aware of the harmful ways in which stereotypes can affect students (Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995), but negative stereotypes can have a powerful influence on would-be rural teachers, too, shaping their notions of what it might be like to work and live in a rural place. Like Romero-Robles, new teachers can take it upon themselves to participate in deep community engagement to learn about local culture, popular pastimes, places to eat, or local events to attend—but we recognize it can be overwhelming to explore a new community while also adapting to a new teaching position. If school leaders make efforts to provide structured opportunities to enter and engage in both the profession and the local community, they can help reduce some of the stress new teachers face and increase their sense of connectedness.

Connecting with community

The value of developing a structured welcome for new teachers to both the school and the local community cannot be overstated. New rural teachers have told us repeatedly that their administrator's specific, personal introductions to school staff and community members have made a positive difference in their feeling of being welcomed and at home in a new place. As one new rural teacher in Montana shared with us, "I spoke with many administrators, and I made my decision based on whom I felt most welcomed by and had similar characteristics and teaching style as the school. The hiring committee made a big difference to me. It allowed me to see I would be a good fit for the school, based on how I got along with the staff.

A practical strategy administrators can use to orient incoming teachers to their new place is to set aside a few of hours to accompany them on a guided community walk, introducing them to community strengths and assets such as local businesses, organizations, health care facilities, civil service opportunities, economic drivers, recreation opportunities, housing, and community infrastructure, while also describing local community leaders and their skills and passions, and sharing stories about local life and history. Setting aside time for a physical walk, or in communities that cover larger areas, a personalized driving tour, can help new teachers make personal connections and lay the foundation for a more long-term attachment to the place (Scannell &

Gifford, 2010). A word of caution, though: Some schools have conducted bus tours in an attempt to introduce new teachers to the area, but this strategy can come across as a sort of "edu-tourism," a pointing at places rather than a real engagement that might inadvertently create an even greater divide between new teachers and community members. As one new teacher remarked, a community introduction that focused on strengths and engagement allowed her to challenge her stereotypes:

> I was able to adjust my lens and begin to see the beauty, benefits, and diversity in the town that I had previously been so quick to judge. My perspective shifted so that I was able to begin the school year with an attitude of openness towards my students and their families, no longer seeing them as an "other" to be pitied or judged. (Schulte, 2018, p.15)

It may seem to go without saying that new teachers need to be introduced to the community, but we've been struck by how often teachers mention this critical step. There is a great deal that leaders can do to keep new teachers from feeling out of place (Roberts et al., 2021) in their new community. Also, building new teachers' connections to the community may not only help teachers thrive in their new positions but it can also increase learning opportunities for students as teachers develop more local knowledge and appreciation for rural students' capabilities.

Supporting place-based practices in the classroom

Another strategy rural school leaders can use to help newcomers put down roots is encouraging the use of place-based curricula in the classroom. Place-based education, which connects learning with the community, has a long tradition in rural classrooms. A *pedagogy of place* leverages students' local knowledge and experiences as they consider how the content of the curriculum relates to the communities in which they live. As students engage in place-based learning, teachers also learn about the community and exercise their own funds of knowledge to reconsider how they relate (or not) to the rural community in which they work. In other words, a focus on place in the rural classroom affords opportunities for students to draw from their local community to consider the world beyond it and for teachers to broker those connections while learning from students. Shanda Warren, a gifted education resource teacher in a rural Appalachian school district, partnered on a university grant to implement place-based instruction (Sparks, 2018). Originally from Florida, Warren was surprised to find that her students knew relatively little about Appalachia, such as traditional oral storytelling. She explains, "We talked about the importance of everyday life and

work here in the Appalachians that affected communities well beyond our mountain range. Together we found many contributions to be proud of that are made here daily. We even overcame some of our own prejudices about other cultures" (Azano et al., 2021, p. 174).

Two specific ways teachers might enhance their understanding through place-based pedagogy are through embracing rural literacies and rethinking evidence-based strategies.

Literacy is a social practice that extends well beyond the acts of reading and writing to include the ways we make meaning of the world. *Rural literacies* in particular are an important way of thinking about how rural life is understood, interpreted, and expressed. One example comes from Edmondson's (2003) work that describes how a group of farmers, in a collective refusal to sell at an unfair price, piled their corn as a symbol of protest. Watching these piles rot *communicated* an injustice – one readily *read* by members of this particular agricultural-based rural midwestern community. For young people in rural schools, their rural literacies can be an essential part of their identity; therefore, embracing those literacies can be a way of honoring students.

As teachers become more literate about rural life, they may find that some "evidence-based" teaching strategies and curricula that "work" in a suburban or urban setting are less effective in a rural one. Traditional educational research tends to overlook certain circumstances that are fairly common in rural schools, such as multi-age classrooms, grade levels and subject areas that are staffed by just one teacher, or teaching assignments that include multiple siblings from the same family. In short, when rural teachers adapt curriculum to meet local needs and leverage local strengths, they often have reason to be skeptical of implementation guides and to take a place-conscious approach to reinterpreting published findings and recommendations (Eppley et al., 2018). In small schools, teachers may have to engage in this kind of inquiry on their own, without the support of same-grade or same-subject colleagues. At the very least, however, administrators can help them develop a schoolwide model for seeking out evidence-based research and determining whether and how studies can be adapted to work in a rural classroom. One example of this strategy in practice is from a federally-funded grant that focused on using place-conscious methods, including the use of *local* norms (rather than universal norms) to identify rural students for gifted education programming (see Azano & Callahan, 2021).

Building relationships

Teachers in all kinds of schools tend to be happier in their work, and more likely to stay in the profession, when they feel supported by colleagues and mentors, especially when they are new and learning their craft (Coburn et al., 2012). But in rural schools, teachers may not have as many colleagues and potential mentors around. In smaller schools, they may be the "only" of their kind — the only 3rd-grade teacher, the only science teacher, or the only music teacher — and they may even be required to travel among school buildings. In Montana, for example, there are more than 60 one- and two-room schools, in which one or two teachers cover all subjects while also playing the roles of school nurse, custodian, and even principal. To find supportive colleagues and mentors, teachers in such schools often seek out teachers from other disciplines to create interdisciplinary units of study, or they might work with teachers from different grades to create opportunities for older students to mentor or read to younger students.

It can be daunting for new teachers, especially those who've moved to a new place, to take the lead in creating these kinds of professional relationships. Unless school and district administrators are proactive in helping them do so, they may not find this kind of support at all, leading them to quit and move away after a year or two.

Ideally, new teachers, with the help of their administrators, can find support and guidance within their own school, but researchers have found that access to out-of-school colleagues and mentors can also promote teacher retention (Jordon, 2019). Thus, if local professional networks are limited, administrators should look for opportunities for new teachers to meet and build relationships with teachers from other schools in the region, perhaps by funding them to participate in a state-level organization or a chapter of a national association, where they can find like-minded colleagues who can share teaching ideas and serve as sounding boards. For instance, administrators can offer to pay association dues and conference fees, and they can provide release time to allow teachers to attend events regularly, so they can maintain these connections over time. Tracei Willis, for example, a teacher in Starkville, Mississippi, built connections with colleagues at a summer institute focusing on teaching about the Holocaust and human rights at the Olga Lengyel Institute, days that led to a GroupMe and Facebook page with colleagues from across the nation. Tracei writes of her network, "We share lesson plans, we plan together, we write together, we read one another's proposals and drafts of random important stuff . . . . We help one another stay focused and on track, and we listen to one another when the focus is gone and we've run way off the track" (Azano, et. al.,

2021, p. 105-106). Tracei continues to teach in part because she has built networks of like-minded colleagues that support her in her work.

Of course, professional relationships are not the only relationships that matter for teacher retention. When people talk about being "rooted in a community," what they really mean is that they have relationships with people outside the school and have found friends or partners who they don't want to leave. We know of one school district that kicked off the school year by inviting the local chamber of commerce and economic development authority to come and talk about all of the opportunities teachers have to get involved in the community — including volunteer groups, religious organizations, and community clubs, everything from the Fiber Arts club and Friends of the Library to local yoga and martial arts classes. In large urban or suburban school systems, it might never occur to administrators to suggest social activities to the adults they've hired. But in rural areas, where these activities are less abundant and more difficult to find, principals and superintendents are wise to make sure teachers feel welcome and know how to get involved.

Putting down roots

Teachers leave for many reasons, but administrators can do a lot to help rural teachers find reasons to stay. By helping them feel more connected to people both in and outside of the schoolhouse, administrators can help new teachers put down roots and make their rural community a long-term home. For many, feeling like an insider or an outsider in a place may not be determined simply by whether you are from there or how long you have lived there — it has a lot to do with feeling wanted and valued as a member of a community. As a teacher now working in rural Montana told us: "Rural schools are a great place because of the number of opportunities open to you. You have the ability to try out different approaches and see what works for students. You also have a chance to make a contribution to the community. And the community support is amazing. They were very welcoming and personable. I have been able to build personal and long-lasting relationships with students and colleagues."

Small changes that help teachers get to know the community, challenge stereotypes, find resources for teaching, and build peer networks and relationships, are useful for any community but can be especially helpful in rural areas, where retaining teachers is a constant challenge. Building connections with the community encourages teachers not only to stay but to thrive.

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