

Improving Low Teacher Retention in Rural Tennessee:

Cultural Education

Jaretta Campbell

Milligan College

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What comes to mind when you hear the word “rural” mentioned in a conversation? Perhaps you picture an isolated, uneducated area which is intolerant to other cultures. Or maybe you recognize some positive aspects in rural areas, such as a close-knit community with refreshing simplicity. The former opinion, though partially stereotypical, is rooted in real cultural problems which create a rift between rural and urban societies. These cultural differences increase the struggle of retaining qualified teachers for rural school systems. The problem of low teacher retention is especially evident in Tennessee, with one third of the state’s counties being classified as rural, or an area with less than 20,000 people according to the Department of Agriculture (2010 Census). Currently, overall teacher retention within the state is mediocre, receiving a C from the *State Tennessee Policy Yearbook* from 2009, with rural areas being much lower (National Council). To improve rural retention, reformers are implementing various methods, mostly focused upon monetary incentives. However, this plan is not sufficient to independently sustain the teacher pool in rural Tennessee. If prospective rural teachers and rural communities are educated in the opposite culture, then retention in rural Tennessee can increase, and in turn, benefit the students and their community.

Before addressing the solution to low teacher retention found in rural areas, it is important to understand why it is such a problem. Numerous studies show that a continuous teacher turnover inhibits the learning environment within the school (Blazer p. 17). If a student is subjected to the transfer of two or three teachers within a single school year, it is clear that the continuity of the subject matter, and the students understanding of it, will be at risk. This constant shift of instructors can result in the decline of a child’s desire and ability to learn. Both of these outcomes often prove to be detrimental.

Low retention among rural teachers also results in the continuous hiring of inexperienced teachers to fill these vacancies. “Compared to teachers working in cities, suburban areas, and towns, rural teachers are more likely to be younger in age and less likely to have earned graduate degrees” (Adedokun, Goodpaster, Weaver p. 9). An important source of knowledge for these new teachers can be found in their more experienced co-workers. However, if no teachers with extensive time in rural areas are present to mentor, incoming teachers cannot draw from their past experiences. In this way, low retention in rural areas inhibits the growth of both teacher and student, which in turn continues a vicious cycle of unprepared individuals. Without a qualified teacher to mentor the newer employees, rural school systems quickly decline into a series of mediocre educators and administrators.

Rural schools struggle to keep a wide range of classes open for students, another consequence of low teacher retention. The result of such a shortage is simply the cancellation of courses that lack a teacher, most specifically the subject areas of science and math (Adedokun, Goodpaster, Weaver). Canceling these classes as a result of low retention can reach past the students and rural communities to an even larger scale. Sally Ride, the first American woman in space, put it this way: “...it’s suicidal to create a society that depends on science and technology in which no one knows anything about science and technology– and that’s the road that we’re headed down” (National Science and Math Institute). Math and science are seen as an essential key to our society, without which rural students will be limited in their college and job choices. On an even larger scale our society will equally suffer from a small pool of professionals in these fields.

Low retention also leaves the administrator with a need to fill these vacant teaching positions with whomever can be found. This often results in unqualified teachers coming into

the classrooms to teach and therefore prolonging the problem. Though their motives are often commendable, administrators are exacerbating problems in the areas of science and math by hiring an educator who is unready to assume the role. Such math and science courses as advanced placement and honors classes require a specific type of educator to ensure student success on college level exams. Unfortunately, the lives of the students and parents are fully dependent upon the school administrator and his/her choice of teachers to fill needed positions. This vulnerability can often result in tension between the administration of small schools and parents who are on the board of education (Chalker).

These problems can occur within any school district; however, rural schools are especially susceptible to continuous teacher turnover. This is partially due to their isolated location (ARCC). Those individuals who do not have rural roots are intimidated by a separation from familiar sights and conveniences. Therefore, teachers are often more inclined to take a position with a more urbanized area in lieu of more sparsely populated regions. Tennessee is a prime example of isolated school systems, with 36.5% of its students being educated in rural schools (ARCC). With this in mind, it is evident that a large amount of Tennessee's schools are affected by prospective teachers' fear of isolation and the risk that may accompany rural life.

Along with a fear of isolation, prospective teachers are wary of the possible difference of rural culture from their own. These fears are given fuel when a teacher begins living in the community itself. Often those from urban or suburban areas are especially concerned with the stereotypes voiced about these communities, some of which were mentioned earlier. Among these are beliefs that those in rural areas are: ill-mannered, poorly educated, and overly conservative of their traditions. To elaborate further Donald Chalker, Editor of Leadership of Rural Schools, states: "Our computers listed 'provincial,' 'uncultured,' 'unrefined,' 'hinterland,'

‘backwoods’ and forsaken’ as synonyms for rural. For ‘urban,’ the thesaurus listed ‘civic,’ ‘civil’ and cultured.’ Over time, such negative connotations have a way of becoming the norm” (Chalker p. 14). Though not entirely untrue, these stereotypes have a way of seeping into the conscience of prospective teachers and deterring them from a career within the more rural school districts.

Low salary and poor achievement are often cited as additional reasons for low retention in rural areas. These schools are often short of funding, resulting in a \$3,000 salary drop from suburban teachers’ pay. This difference in salary can be partially attributed to the lower cost of living in rural areas when compared to more populous areas. Despite the lower salary in rural areas, money is not cited by these teachers as the main reason for leaving a school district (Blazer). As for achievement, students score better than those in urban schools and below those in suburban districts. However, studies show that the majority of rural teachers are more satisfied with salary and achievement than their urban counterparts (Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, KewalRamani, Provasnik, Xie.).

Current Efforts to Retain Teachers

In order to lower attrition, Tennessee is implementing a series of programs to reduce the fears teachers face about rural areas. In 2009 the *Annual Joint Report on Pre-Kindergarten through Higher Education in Tennessee* revealed several ways in which Tennessee would begin to lower the attrition of teachers within the state, specifically focused on the more rural school districts. One particular aspect which is mentioned within this annual report is the improvement of mentoring programs. As mentioned earlier, lack of teacher mentors is a cause as well as a result of high attrition within the rural areas. This report focuses on a plan to raise retention

through training an increasing number of teachers for mentoring positions. In the 2000-2001 school year, 800 Tennessee educators were trained specifically to be an aid to the more inexperienced teachers entering the school system. In five years the number increased to 4,000 educators trained to mentor effectively (Tennessee State Board). By recognizing the importance of experienced teachers to mentor their newer colleagues, Tennessee's Education Board members took a step in the direction of curbing attrition rates in rural areas. With help from these mentors, the new teachers are given a direct connection to ideas that will allow them to be successful in the classroom and therefore, remain teaching in rural areas. This program is a positive step to improving retention, not just in rural Tennessee schools, but across the state as well.

More state governments are using monetary incentives as another way to raise retention across the board. These states do so specifically in hopes that monetary gains will be enough to entice teachers into rural areas that are more difficult to staff. Tennessee, among numerous states, has enacted a minimum wage for teachers, in an effort to have a similar income range to the more urbanized states; by doing so Tennessee's Department of Education is endeavoring to remain competitive and thus attract teachers to the rural schools within its borders (Jimerson). This program has seen positive outcomes by aiding teachers and raising retention in some areas. However, retention in rural districts has not risen enough to permanently sustain the teaching program with qualified, experienced teachers (National Council on Teacher Quality).

Tennessee has also recently enacted a Teaching Scholars Program, which is another way in which the state uses monetary incentives to raise the teacher retention rate. The program requires the prospective teacher to be a resident of Tennessee with a minimum G.P.A. of 2.75. In order to receive the benefits from this program, the recipient must teach in a Tennessee

school, preferably rural, for at least one year (www.TN.gov). Though this measure is helpful to the prospective teachers, these individuals will be unlikely to remain in these rural schools unless they have planned to do so before learning about this program. Therefore, this tool is only helpful with attaining teachers for rural areas, and not with retaining these teachers.

These current efforts to retain rural teachers with monetary incentives are by no means unimportant. However, studies continue to show that teachers do not cite salary as the top reason for leaving a school district (Blazer). In fact, Robert Maranto and James Shuls, both education professors at the University of Arkansas, cite surprising results from past research done by Liu, Johnson, and Peske. In this study, 13 rural teachers who received dispersed bonuses over a set amount of years were interviewed. “Although the disbursements were designed to keep teachers in the field for four years only five of the 13 teachers interviewed continue teaching long enough to receive all of the bonus money” (Maranto and Shuhls). The findings of this research suggest that bonuses are similar in effectiveness to the previously mentioned tuition payment program. Both types of monetary incentives succeed in attracting a number of new teachers for education positions within rural districts. Yet, these efforts will be unlikely to raise teacher retention in rural areas

It is important to note that, though important, these monetary incentives should not be the main motive of prospective teachers. True, these individuals need a practical wage to support themselves and a family, but their focus should not solely rest upon financial gains. If this motive was largely true the servant aspect behind the teaching profession would be lost, and therefore diminish the possibilities within the classroom. An excess of monetary incentives can become a negative model for students, especially those mature enough to understand the concepts behind these bonuses. (Maranto and Shuhls).

Tennessee is focusing upon options besides that of monetary incentives to raise teacher retention found within rural schools. A close examination of teacher training programs within the state is currently underway to determine which methods of teacher preparation are most effective in retaining teachers. Due to legislation from the Tennessee General Assembly in 2007, the State Board of Education must observe and assess these education programs upon their outcomes. Such data as praxis results, G.P.A., and teacher retention are examined and recorded with the report card for each year. By recording this information and assigning a “grade” to each, the state is attempting to improve the effectiveness of each individual education program (Tennessee Higher Education Board). This effort is similar to that of other states as these educational legislatures attempt to provide a sustainable pool of desirable teachers within all of the school districts.

Retention by Culturally Educating the Educator

It is evident that these tactics are helpful to a small extent; yet, they cannot effectively combat the problem alone because they focus heavily upon only part of the problem. Although the teacher training programs appear to be improving on paper, what can be said about the preparedness of these future educators to teach specifically in rural areas if the need should arise? Nothing is mentioned within these reforms of the teachers’ specific familiarity with the rural tradition and environment. As seen within cliché presumptions and stereotypes, individuals should be familiar with the rural environment into which they are about to enter. After all, when moving into a different culture it is considered good practice to understand the general concepts that drive that society. In the case of rural communities, concepts such as tradition, cohesiveness, and simplicity lie at the heart of everyday life. Perhaps the rural schools of Tennessee need reform and change, but as any good compromise, educators must work to sustain

the teaching profession in rural areas with qualified and experienced teachers who understand rural communities. To do this, the focus of reformers must be shifted. Instead of offering temporary solution such as bonuses and tuition payment programs, which only *attain* teachers, Tennessee must *retain* these teachers. A way in which to achieve this is through the introduction of rural culture in the form of teacher preparation courses.

Clearly, rural society differs from that of urban areas. Generalizations continue to be made about more isolated regions, though many have an element of truth to them. The belief is that rural communities are extremely traditional, with a narrow view of the rest of society. In some ways, this belief is indeed applicable to rural areas. A prime example of this can be found within the book *Leadership for Rural Schools*. Within the text a principal relates an experience he had when first becoming the administrator of a rural school district. He was given the opportunity to check the bus routes with a co-worker who had lived within the community for several years. Through the simple act of making these rounds, the principle was able to socialize with the community: “By acknowledging the sincerity of the people, he gained their trust” (Chalker).

This testimony provides a possible solution to the problem of teacher retention. Colleges across Tennessee, and perhaps the nation, can raise retention by introducing individuals to the lifestyle in which they will be living if they choose to teach in rural school districts. By focusing upon the cohesive, interconnected nature of rural communities mentioned earlier, incoming teachers can be more prepared to enter into this new lifestyle with the least amount of stress. Rather than 80% leaving the teaching profession after 3 years (Tennessee Higher Education Commission), these new teachers will become more comfortable with their rural surroundings

and be more likely to be accepted into the community. If this is the case, then the retention of teachers in rural areas will increase substantially.

It is also extremely important for these teachers to become a part of rural life, due to the fact that the community and the school are intertwined. Often the school building serves as an extension of the community, with county wide functions being held at the schools for lack of other venues (Chalker). This is the case within my own home of Greeneville; though not excessively rural, the city's high school and a performing arts center share some common space. This serves as a continual reminder of the effect that community and school have upon one another. Therefore, without a strong standing among the parents and neighbors of the community, it is difficult for teachers to have a strong standing within the classroom. If prospective educators can realize this, their success as teachers and the likelihood of remaining in the rural school district will be noticeably increased.

Retention by Introducing Rural Areas to Diverse Culture

The idea of educating the educators in the culture of rural life is necessary to the success of incoming teachers, and a possibility that continues to be overlooked. However, rural communities have a responsibility to meet the efforts of prospective teachers with efforts of their own. The stereotypes so often voiced about rural areas are rooted within real issues. If these are addressed then the community will be a more accommodating environment for qualified teachers.

A specific accusation towards rural culture is their intolerance for ideas that conflict with their own. Sadly, this is true within religion, ethnicity, and social position. Religion especially is a point on which rural Tennesseans stand firmly. This can be attributed to the states placement within the Bible Belt, where those of a different or no religion are often discredited. As a result,

rural communities are often hesitant to hire and keep teachers who profess a drastically different belief. This prejudice can unfortunately exclude teachers who are qualified to teach a course that is important to the school's curriculum.

To combat this lack of tolerance, an introduction to other cultures must be implemented. If rural communities are introduced to diverse ways of thinking, then their appreciation for these cultures can increase. This can be achieved by the education of rural communities with the positive aspects of other cultures. Though this seems straightforward on paper, cultural reform is much more difficult than the reform of teacher education programs. It is a gradual process that will not succeed in each community. However, in order to retain teachers, the obstacle of intolerance must be overcome.

Rural areas are also known for their outdated way of life. Though not completely true, rural schools are an excellent example of this belief. These schools struggle to raise funds to update their campus, which often deters teachers from remaining there for longer than necessary (Chalker). In a phone interview with Dr. Hilty of WCU I asked her to what extent the lack of technology deters learning. Her response was that some of the poorest countries have adequate access to the internet in order to aid educators in teaching their students. She maintained that if rural schools were to devote a larger percentage of the budget to web based instruction, more qualified teachers would be retained. Though this seems like a large request for some rural schools, most of Tennessee's schools are able to redirect a portion of the budget to raise teacher retention.

The consequences of low retention reach beyond the individual students to the entire community. Quality education is a must if rural communities are to be economically improved,

and quality cannot be achieved when low retention causes a low number of teachers, many of which are under qualified. Research done by Carsey Institute maintains that “education has for generations been a key predictor of economic success, it is even more important today simply for basic survival” (Ulrich). It is imperative that the teacher pool in rural Tennessee become sustainable in order to raise the prosperity of the area.

Further research done by Carsey Institute states that the education of one generations predicts the quality of education within the next generation. With this in mind, low retention points to a continued cycle of undereducated teachers and other members of these rural communities as well. This is not a new trend; instead, this cycle has been going on for generations with no apparent solution. However, higher retention, achieved through the cultural education of both teacher and community, can slow this cycle and in the process improve rural community life.

Perhaps the rural schools of Tennessee need reform and change, but as any good compromise, educators must work to sustain the teaching profession in rural areas with qualified and experienced teachers. To do this, the focus of reformers must be shifted. Instead of offering temporary solution such as bonuses and tuition payment programs, which only attract teachers for rural areas, Tennessee must retain these individuals. Introduction of rural culture in the form of teacher preparation courses can improve the retention rate and allow for qualified teachers in the more rural areas of Tennessee. Likewise, the introduction of diverse cultures to rural communities will work to encourage tolerance, and therefore open the door for these qualified teachers to enter rural Tennessee’s classrooms.

It is important to note that these cultural measures cannot be implemented independently of past reforms. Instead, a compromise of culture must be added to current programs such as bonuses, tuition payment, and “grading” of teacher education courses. These measures cannot stand alone, as they focus upon the technical and monetary elements of teacher retention. Therefore, they must be combined with cultural efforts in order to reap significant increases in teacher retention. If this is accomplished, then Tennessee’s rural school systems will benefit from a sustainable pool of teachers who are qualified in their specific field. This alone would result in the improvement of rural communities across the state, and if implemented, across the nation.

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