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Will They Stay or Will They Go? Leadership Behaviors That Increase Teacher Retention in Rural Schools

**Matthew Frahm
Marie Cianca**

Research has consistently shown that the quality of teachers working with students has a greater impact on academic achievement than any other school-related factor. However, close to a third of new teachers continue to leave the profession within their first 5 years of employment. In particular, hard-to-staff rural schools have struggled to attract and retain promising educators. While many factors appear to influence these troubling rates of retention, experts have consistently identified administrative support in rural schools to be of unique importance. Yet, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific leadership behaviors that new teachers interpret as supportive. This qualitative study collected data from three focus groups, composed, separately, of superintendents, principals, and teachers, in a program for aspiring administrators. By analyzing the themes that emerged, the study found that rural schools have to try much harder and in more active ways to retain new teachers because of the constraints existing within rural education. The study also found that rural school support for new teachers needs to be a collective responsibility to positively impact the retention of new teachers. Finally, the study found that the structural supports, affirmation, and encouragement offered by their organizations help to heighten the retention of new teachers. The findings provided for the basis of specific recommendations for rural school principals and superintendents, confirming that rural school leaders can, indeed, leverage leadership behaviors to better retain talented teachers.

For years, studies have shown that teachers play a critical role in improving outcomes for students. More than any other school-related factor, experts have demonstrated that skilled educators dramatically increase levels of academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000), and they have even suggested that teacher quality influences the long-term earning potential of pupils (Hanushek, 2011). Despite, however, a general consensus that recruiting and retaining skilled teachers is essential to guaranteeing student success, an alarming number of novice educators continue to leave the profession within their first 5 years of employment (Boyd et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). While the unwanted turnover can negatively affect learners, it has also been proven costly for K–12 districts that are tasked with attracting and developing certified professionals (Brown & Schainker, 2008). Aside from diverting valuable resources from academic programs to fund hiring practices, retention issues have also been shown to disrupt instructional expertise, collegial relationships, and healthy organizational cultures (Boyd et al., 2011; Brown & Schainker, 2008; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Moreover, it should not be assumed that attrition affects all school systems

equally. Research has indicated that hard-to-staff urban and rural districts are unduly impacted, and studies have further suggested that turnover can reinforce existing levels of poverty and low achievement (Beesley et al., 2010; Carver-Thomas et al., 2016; Monk, 2007). Yet, despite this disparity, rural systems rarely receive the same levels of attention typically afforded larger organizations (Monk, 2007). Researchers often fail to acknowledge the complexities that exist when examining *small* or *rural* schools—one does not necessarily imply the other—and they tend to minimize the regional differences that surround teacher retention in various U.S. states (Beesley, 2010). Probing the intricacies involved with rurality, Nguyen (2020) pointed out that “teachers in sparsely populated states are more likely to turn over than teachers in more densely populated states” (p. 12), and differences concerning labor markets, geographic isolation, and certification needs often lead to a lack of uniformity in turnover across rural contexts.

In hopes of improving the rate of teacher retention, experts have long explored the various factors influencing why novice educators choose to leave their positions (Borman & Dowling, 2008;

Carver-Thomas et al., 2016). While some findings noted the significance of geography, compensation, and available resources (Boyd et al., 2011; Guarino et al., 2006; Ladd, 2011), others have highlighted the need for new teachers to experience positive professional relationships and collegial work environments (Boyd et al., 2011). Furthermore, research has consistently shown that administrative support has the unique ability to limit teacher turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Of concern, unfortunately, is the lack of specificity that continues to surround the precise leadership behaviors that new teachers interpret to be encouraging (Boyd et al., 2011; Brown & Wynn, 2007; Hammer et al., 2005). Compounding the ambiguity associated with administrative support, rural school leaders often lack the same levels of experience enjoyed by their counterparts in larger, more affluent organizations (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Kilmer et al., 2017). Frequently assuming their roles with little formal experience, many rural administrators are forced to grow in relative isolation, often developing their leadership skills without the assistance of larger leadership teams (Manard & Wieczorek, 2018).

This study explored leadership behaviors that rural school superintendents, principals, and teachers who are aspiring administrators have used to support new teachers in their organizations. Using a qualitative approach, the inquiry prompted participants of three focus groups to respond to the following research questions:

1. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as challenges to retaining talented teachers?
2. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as leadership behaviors they have employed, or hope to employ, that have positively affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?
3. What do school leaders and aspiring administrators of rural school districts identify as programs or support systems that have affected, or might positively affect, talented teacher retention?

Although much research exists regarding teacher retention, this study makes a unique contribution for three specific reasons. First, when examining issues relating to teacher retention, studies have typically relied on quantitative methods for gathering and analyzing data. In particular, researchers have utilized information collected from different

administrations of the School and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Shen et al., 2012; Urick, 2016). While the studies have provided insight from broad populations, the nature of the methodology suggests that the literature might benefit from the more conceptual and descriptive approach of qualitative explorations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, because the majority of K–12 students attend urban or suburban districts (Copeland, 2013), few studies have committed the resources required to understand the needs of rural schools. Without acknowledging the unique characteristics of rural settings (Sparks, 2019), it is unlikely that the field will be able to adequately guide rural administrators hoping to better assist inexperienced educators. Finally, although administrative support has been shown to slow unwanted rates of attrition, a lack of clarity continues to surround the specific behaviors new teachers interpret to be encouraging (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2005). Rural school administrators, superintendents, and school principals, to better prepare for the future, would benefit from additional detail relating to how individuals can effectively nurture novice educators in rural settings.

Literature Review

Because low rates of teacher retention can be problematic for any school district, a robust literature has been created around the issue. Relatedly, similar problems involving turnover in the private sector have led to comparable studies in unrelated occupations. To narrow the review of literature, the following sections have focused specifically on the unique needs of rural districts, as well as the important roles played by principals and superintendents in retaining teachers new to the profession.

Teacher Retention in Rural School Districts

It is commonly understood that teacher turnover occurs more frequently in urban schools, which are characterized by higher rates of poverty, minority enrollment, and lower levels of academic achievement (Guarino et al., 2006). Yet, researchers have also suggested that it can be equally as difficult for rural schools to recruit and retain talented teachers (Beesley et al., 2010; Guarino et al., 2006). Facing obstacles involving compensation, location, working conditions, and federal requirements,

Hammer et al. (2005) noted special challenges for small districts. Highlighting this point, Heiser (2017) found that over half of the chief school officers who responded to a survey in New York State claimed to be experiencing a teacher shortage in their organizations. Similarly, the New York State Council of School Superintendents collected comparable information after surveying members in the summer of 2018 (Lowry, 2018). The results showed concerns regarding teacher shortages, with larger percentages of superintendents from rural areas characterized by low enrollment and higher rates of poverty identifying the issue as a *significant problem* (Lowry, 2018). The situation is not unique to New York State, and Monk (2007) claimed that data involving teacher experience suggest “the smallest schools face the greatest hiring and retention challenges” (p. 159). Although Carver-Thomas et al. (2016) noted that differences in funding mechanisms, preparation, and certification requirements can lead to regional discrepancies that do not always align with national statistics, Beesley et al. (2010) posited that attrition may have a more profound impact in rural schools where single teachers make up larger portions of departments or teams. Because most of the characteristics that define a school as rural cannot be easily changed, it may be argued that there is a special need to enhance the local practices of school leaders to support and retain qualified teachers (Boyd et al., 2009).

Unique Importance of Principals

While researchers have identified many factors that impact teacher turnover, administrative support has consistently been recognized as a critical component in retaining effective educators (Ladd, 2011). In particular, Johnson (2006) emphasized the significance of school principals because of their responsibilities involved with creating schedules, providing resources, facilitating collaborative interactions, and establishing community partnerships. Because they are uniquely positioned to impact levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, Bogler (2001) found that principals had the ability to influence whether certain instructors decided to stay in the profession. Recognizing that teaching can be a lonely and challenging experience for first-year educators, Kardos et al. (2001) asserted that principals could shape collegial work environments, and that they could be called upon to serve as a figurative “marriage counselor, town lawyer,

sounding board, financial advisor” (Brown & Wynn, 2007, p. 54) and patriarch for their organizations. Despite, however, the significance of principals in providing needed administrative support, it should be noted that the job has evolved dramatically in recent years (Lynch, 2012). Once viewed as primarily responsible for managing student behaviors and attending to the daily operations of school buildings, modern principals are required to engage in culture building, visioning, budgeting, and improving instructional practices (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Pannell et al., 2015). Yet, too many principals are inadequately prepared for the demands of their positions (Miller, 2013). Often unable to develop the competencies required to excel as instructional leaders, the problem can be exacerbated by the fact that approximately 25% of principals “leave their schools each year” (School Leaders Network, 2014, p. 1)—presenting distinct barriers for rural districts in need of the trusting relationships required for stability and growth (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Role of Superintendents in Rural School Districts

Increased expectations relating to academic performance have required school principals to evolve as instructional leaders in past years (Lynch, 2012). Subsequently, Björk et al. (2018) argued that recent educational reforms have led to an evolution in the responsibilities held by school superintendents as well. Traditionally charged with establishing an academic vision, supervising teachers, and managing daily operations in local districts, changing expectations have required superintendents to respond to a variety of external pressures (Björk et al., 2014). Whether they have been asked to meet state or federal mandates, work with elected boards, advocate for needed funding, or communicate with various stakeholders, superintendents have had to focus much of their time on “launching and sustaining large-scale systemic reform” (Björk et al., 2014, pp. 459–460). This is not to say, however, that new global pressures have eliminated the need for superintendents to provide desired support for teachers. On the contrary, Peel and McCary (1999) cited expectations that superintendents ensure the social, emotional, and health-related well-being of students—with essentially the same resources—as sources of potential burnout for educators. With concerns about creating overwhelming expectations for teachers, experts have suggested that superintendents have important duties in providing

the vision, collaboration, shared decision-making, and positive cultures schools needed to retain effective instructors (Peel & McCary, 1999). Additionally, in larger urban or suburban districts where support from superintendents might solely take the form of setting compensation, signing bonuses, or making health insurance contributions, chief school officers in rural organizations often enjoy a more intimate level of proximity with their staff (Copeland, 2013). Typically having daily contact with students and teachers, rural school superintendents are positioned to directly impact the experience of first-year educators and to serve as a bridge to stakeholders in the community.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory, or motivation-hygiene theory, to better understand the different characteristics that impact teacher satisfaction. After conducting interviews with engineers and accountants, Herzberg (2003) suggested that separate factors need to be considered when examining job *satisfaction* as opposed to job *dissatisfaction*. Viewing the two as separate and distinct, Herzberg (2003) classified aspects, such as "achievement, recognition for achievement, the work itself, responsibility, and growth or advancement" (p. 7), as intrinsic motivators capable of satisfying workers. Furthermore, he carefully posited that a lack of these motivators did not lead to dissatisfaction but, instead, to the absence of job satisfaction (Herzberg, 2003). When applying this concept to education, Perrachione et al. (2008) identified instructing students as a motivator, and Bogler (2001) described autonomy, open communication, and shared decision-making to be intrinsic influences capable of improving teacher satisfaction.

Operating separately from intrinsic motivators, Herzberg's (2003) two-factor theory submits that problems relating to certain hygiene factors can lead to worker dissatisfaction. Categorizing them as extrinsic influences, Herzberg (2003) wrote that, "company policy and administration, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, salary, status, and security" (p. 7) each had the capability of impacting the way employees felt about their positions. Recognizing the implication of hygiene factors on teacher retention, Perrachione et al. (2008) strongly advised leaders of school systems to invest in the professional development, resources, wage conditions, and class sizes needed to mitigate

dissatisfaction. Additionally, Bogler (2001) found that principals have a unique ability to impact the levels of satisfaction, as well as dissatisfaction, experienced by teachers and, as a result, influence whether certain instructors decided to stay in the profession.

Methods

While focus groups have historically been used as qualitative methods for collecting information in marketing- and health-related fields (Puchta & Potter, 2004), educational researchers have increasingly brought small groups together to share common experiences (Hatch, 2002). By asking school leaders a series of open-ended questions, this study collected data from three separate focus groups—conducted over a 1-month period—and gave researchers the chance to explore themes and note insightful observations concerning leadership behaviors that impact teacher retention.

The setting for this research study involved a shared-service area in New York State encompassing 2,269 square miles. Home to 25 public school districts located primarily in four counties, the shared service area is predominantly rural and agrarian, distinguished by a variety of towns, villages, and small cities. The 25-component public school districts in the shared-service area collectively educate close to 35,500 students in Grades UPK–12. The largest district serves approximately 4,500 students, and the smallest district has an enrollment of just over 400 students. After eliminating four non-rural schools from involvement in the focus groups, a list of eligible participants from 21 districts was assembled. The list of potential participants included 21 superintendents, 77 building principals, and approximately 30 aspiring administrators. To be invited to participate in this study, the aspiring administrators needed to be teachers who were part of a specific leadership program that was coordinated by the shared-service area. Because of their unique professional positions, the aspiring administrators as current teachers had the potential to provide insight into the administrative support they experienced as practicing teachers as well as the training they received in their formal preparation to become school leaders.

Demographics of Focus Group Participants

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College, invitation

Table 1
Demographic Information for Focus Group

Focus Group (Gender, Level – if applicable)	Years in K–12 Education (<i>n</i>)	Years in Current Position (<i>n</i>)
Superintendents (2 Female, 6 Male)	20–29 (7)	0–4 (3)
	30–39 (1)	5–9 (4)
		15–19 (1)
Principals (3 Female, 5 Male, 3 Elementary School, 2 Middle School, 3 High School)	10–19 (4)	0–4 (4)
	20–29 (3)	5–9 (4)
	30–39 (1)	
Teachers/Aspiring Administrators (5 Female, 2 Male)		0–4 (3)
	0–9 (1)	5–9 (2)
	10–19 (6)	10–14 (1)
		15–19 (1)

emails were sent to eligible participants. The email provided an introduction, background information on the research, and an overview of this study. To thank the participants for their participation and time, potential participants were offered a gift card as a small token. Once the interested individuals responded to the initial email, a second email was sent to the study participants with an informed consent form, along with needed dates, times, and locations for the focus group sessions. To ensure the focus groups were representative of the region, the researchers selected individuals from different geographic locations and included administrators working in elementary as well as secondary schools. Because the participants were coming from different locations within the shared service area, the focus groups were held in a centralized location that offered a comfortable environment for discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Each of the focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes in length, and the sessions comprised participants holding similar professional roles to avoid potential imbalances of power (Table 1).

The first focus group involved eight superintendents from rural districts located within the same shared service area. The participants had worked in public education for at least 20 years, with three of the individuals holding their superintendent positions, at the time of this study, for 0–4 years; four superintendents holding their positions for 5–9 years; and one superintendent holding the position for 10–14 years. The second focus group comprised eight school principals from different rural districts, each with at least 10 years of experience working in public education. To ensure that each school level had representation in the conversation, the second focus group involved principals from three elementary schools, two middle schools, and three high schools.

The final focus group consisted of seven aspiring administrators from two separate cohorts of a specific leadership program coordinated by the shared service area. While one aspiring administrator had spent 0–9 years working in public education, the other six had 10–19 years of experience in the profession.

Data Collection

To ensure that the focus groups were conducted in a consistent manner, a protocol was used to confirm selection criteria and outline the purpose of this study, the process that would be followed, and how confidentiality was to be maintained. A set of questions created by the researchers with accompanying probes was used to elicit responses from the participants (Table 2). Based on themes appearing in the literature involving teacher retention, as well as Herzberg’s (1966, 2003) two-factor theory, the open-ended questions prompted comments from the participants on the importance of administrative support in their schools. Finally, the focus groups were informed that the sessions would be recorded for the purpose of transcription, and that field notes would be taken by a scribe throughout the sessions.

Data Analysis

After securing transcriptions of the focus groups, a cycle of open coding was used to categorize specific segments of information (Miles et al., 2014). As key words and concepts emerged, 84 separate codes were ultimately identified across the three focus group transcripts. After reviewing the initial coding information, key chunks of information were collapsed into several themes and subthemes, which emerged across all of the focus group transcripts during a second cycle of coding. After making

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. There are a lot of factors that contribute to whether teachers remain in a school district or leave the district. Tell me about teacher retention in schools where you have worked.
 2. Think back to when you were first starting out as a teacher. Tell me about a school administrator, if you had one, who did or said something that made you wonder if the school was a good match for you.
 3. Why might inexperienced teachers choose to leave their positions in rural districts?
 4. How is a collegial or supportive atmosphere developed in your school? Can you give examples?
 5. How are new teachers supported? Tell me about ways you personally try to provide support for new teachers.
 6. What are some formal systems that are in place in your district? What is your involvement in providing the supports?
 7. Are there ways for new teachers to participate in school-wide decisions? How are new teachers empowered?
 8. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked about?
-

connections by triangulating the information shared by the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators (Miles et al., 2014), 11 themes were identified with a total of 13 subthemes. Because each of the three groups provided commentary on many of the same concepts, the transcripts were labeled “S,” “P,” and “AA” to correspond with the focus groups consisting of superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators.

Findings and Recommendations

To review, this study posed three research questions involving obstacles to teacher retention, leadership behaviors, and ways that administrators provided structural supports for new educators. The qualitative data collected from the focus groups consisting of rural school superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators produced key findings that addressed the three research questions.

Research Question 1 asked school leaders and aspiring administrators to identify the challenges to retaining talented teachers. In each of the focus groups, participants consistently indicated that constraints related to geographic distance from population centers, limited resources, and lower salary and benefit packages presented unique challenges for rural districts. Furthermore, the results of the study also included the finding that rural schools have to try considerably harder and in more active ways to build authentic relationships because of the isolation that new teachers often experience. Rather than passively wait for personal connections

to occur, the study found that administrators need to proactively demonstrate connections to new teachers, and in the process, involve other faculty and staff in building supportive work environments.

Reinforcing Herzberg’s (2003) assertion that interpersonal relationships are important hygiene factors in determining levels of employee dissatisfaction, it was not surprising when an elementary school principal emphatically stated that, “the underlying theme is if you don’t have good relationships, you’re not going to retain teachers. Once again, I would write relationships as the number one thing you need to keep teachers.” In a parallel manner, individuals in this study highlighted the unique importance of building authentic connections with inexperienced employees. Given that new teachers in rural schools tended to live outside the region and had fewer opportunities for establishing social connections, the participants saw it as their responsibility to help facilitate the development of authentic relationships. Rather than to focus on formal exchanges, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators described regular interactions centering on family, personal interests, and leisure activities. One female superintendent, in particular, shared an example of how she would take each new teacher out to lunch. Instead of discussing work, she remarked that “it’s just a time for us to connect as humans and find some commonalities.” Relatedly, an aspiring administrator commented on the impact it had when his superintendent, at the start of each school year, told the faculty about how his family spent the summer months. It communicated a sense of who the leader

was outside of his or her profession, and it gave all of the educators permission to share personal details about themselves.

In each of the focus groups, participants provided responses that reinforced Burkauser's (2017) finding that principals have a significant impact on key areas important to working conditions for new teachers. Even when engaging in formal professional undertakings, such as observations, leaders spoke about using the interactions as chances to check-in with new teachers and to deepen existing relationships and prevent isolation. In particular, a high school principal said that he would regularly use these check-ins with new teachers to help them feel connected. He went on to say that in "small districts, you're the only teacher teaching the subject area," and he noted that inexperienced educators "need to, at least, feel like they're not on an island, even though they are in a lot of ways." When this happened, a high school principal said it made new teachers "feel like you're not just someone. You are someone, and you're noticed and appreciated." Furthermore, although many of their identified contacts had to do with ordinary topics, participants placed a special importance on significant life events such as weddings, births, or the passing of loved ones. In a moving story, a veteran leader detailed how a building principal had shown up at his house to express concern after he lost his father early on in his career. The participant remarked that "it felt like I mattered, like my life mattered for the building. It was huge. You know what I mean?"

As the participants shared the importance of cultivating authentic human relationships, it also became clear that effective leaders approached these endeavors with high degrees of intentionality. Instead of waiting for collegial connections to organically occur, the individuals described active strategies they used for supporting inexperienced educators. For example, when reflecting on his first year as a teacher, a high school administrator shared that his "principal was a big hallway person." He went on to say that during passing periods, his principal was always "popping in" and asking "how are you? How's it going? Do you need anything?" Aside from regular check-ins, superintendents, in particular, articulated a commitment to bonding over lunches, and they outlined ways they increased a sense of familiarity with the region by scheduling bus tours and visitations to local civic organizations. Interestingly, leaders went beyond describing how they developed personal relationships with new

teachers, and they detailed purposeful ways they supported positive interactions between coworkers. Believing that friction between colleagues accelerated rates of attrition, participants viewed it as their responsibility to help create a sense of belonging for new teachers.

In each of the focus groups, participants highlighted the ways administrative quality could impact job dissatisfaction (Bogler, 2001; Herzberg, 2003) and acknowledged that school leaders can dramatically influence rates of teacher retention. Participants also suggested that administrators could help prevent troubling levels of isolation for novice educators by helping them build positive peer relationships and navigate complex school cultures (Hasselquist et al., 2017). Relatedly, the focus group results reinforced the unique ways in which principals could impact the collective morale experienced by school faculties (Brown & Wynn, 2018; Hasselquist et al., 2017; Kardos et al., 2001; Mertler, 2002). The study's finding relating to actively building authentic relationships aligns with previous research of Brown and Wynn (2018) and Kilmer et al. (2017), and it provides recommendations that principals should pursue to slow the rate of teacher retention.

First, because of their proximity within small, rural schools, principals should establish purposeful plans for connecting with inexperienced educators. Rather than passively prioritizing availability by staying in their offices, effective school principals should embrace active strategies for relationship building. By making themselves visible in hallways, stopping by classrooms on a regular basis, and asking new teachers about their families and personal interests, principals can intentionally build authentic relationships with new staff members (Kardos et al., 2001). Additionally, principals should look for specific opportunities to validate the efforts of novice educators. Because of the varied challenges faced by new teachers when beginning their careers, principals should use well-placed handwritten notes, emails, and phone calls to build relationships and communicate support. While appreciated by educators at the time of delivery, the actions also have the potential to accelerate the development of confident and connected educators who can quickly assume various responsibilities in rural districts.

Research Question 2 asked school leaders to identify behaviors that positively affect teacher retention. The study found that support for new teachers needs to be a collective responsibility to

positively impact the retention of new teachers. Collected data revealed that support must be embraced as a shared endeavor involving all members of K–12 school communities. Echoing Herzberg’s (2003) assertions regarding the importance of relations between co-workers, a superintendent claimed that the primary reason new teachers exited his district involved instances in which they were “not clicking with staff.” Likewise, a superintendent suggested that veteran colleagues could actually discourage new skilled teachers when they felt threatened by the energy and innovative practices of their inexperienced colleagues. Speaking to this point, a second superintendent talked about how a fourth-grade teacher “actually got a lot of pressure to kind of tone it down a little bit” because she “set the bar so much higher.” Because the superintendents indicated that such occurrences could be especially devastating in small social settings, the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators each stressed the importance of creating welcoming environments in which veteran educators collaboratively nurtured the growth of inexperienced colleagues. Ranging from informal interactions to more structured systems of support, participants indicated that they each had important roles to play when it came to providing necessary levels of encouragement.

To help new teachers establish personal connections, master course content, and navigate complex cultural norms, focus group participants stressed the different ways in which educators could provide support. After detailing intentional examples of how principals and superintendents could check-in with new teachers, aspiring administrators highlighted opportunities faculty and staff had for offering care on a daily basis. To reinforce the bond and commitment associated with collegial relationships, one aspiring administrator talked about how she told new teachers, “We’re in it together. Just call me, text me, email me. I’m always available. You’re never bothering me. It’s part of that relationship.” Echoing an associated sentiment, a second aspiring administrator shared the need for school leaders to go out of their way to establish relationships with new teachers to bring about a sense of belonging. More than once, the focus group participants used the word “family” when describing meaningful connections for new teachers; and, in a moving statement, a primary principal declared “I feel new teachers stay because it’s a sense of community. It’s a sense of family.”

Job satisfaction has been shown to have a significant impact on the rates of turnover in school settings (Koedel et al., 2017). Studies have routinely shown teachers suggesting troubling rates of unhappiness. Because rural schools must generally provide the same layers of assistance as those offered by larger urban or suburban organizations, they are forced to leverage the collective contributions of skilled educators. As participants detailed the collective ways in which they informally encouraged novice educators, they also shared examples of how they provided structural support. Whether the assistance had to do with induction programs, mechanisms for feedback, or professional development, the superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators each described important ways they lent a hand to new teachers. Beginning with providing the actual services themselves, aspiring administrators in particular talked about assisting as mentors, organizing orientations, and scheduling learning walks. While the participating principals and superintendents did not highlight the same degrees of direct involvement, they did articulate significant levels of commitment. By securing funding, offering program oversight, and endorsing the efforts of teacher leaders, the school administrators provided both the direction as well as the resources needed for programs to function properly. When examined holistically, the study results showed that the job of supporting new teachers does not lie with isolated leaders, but rather with the complementary efforts of dedicated teams.

Individuals feel a greater sense of satisfaction when they are connected and identify as belonging to a group or organization. Likewise, new teachers want to be shown empathy and support as they navigate their new roles and responsibilities. Although novice teachers have much to learn, it is recommended that principals immediately go about involving them in collective endeavors (Davis & Wilson, 2000). Because inexperienced educators often enter the profession with enthusiasm and innovative instructional ideas, principals should seek to include their voices when making key decisions. By asking new teachers to serve on hiring committees, provide professional development opportunities (Burkhauser, 2017), and create personalized academic programs, principals can quicken the rate at which new teachers become invested in rural districts. Principals should also encourage the collective efforts of staff members in supporting inexperienced educators (Johnson, 2006). At an informal level, principals should

recognize that established instructors might feel threatened by new teachers, and they should encourage their veteran colleagues to communicate patience and care.

Research Question 3 asked school leaders to identify programs or supports that positively affect talented teacher retention. A third finding of the study was that because many novice educators in rural districts accept positions with little or no formal teaching experience, it was somewhat expected that superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators would highlight the structural supports offered by their organizations. Surprisingly, however, participants repeatedly detailed how affirmation and encouragement helped to heighten the confidence and risk-taking needed for professional empowerment. The validation identified as essential in the focus groups highlighted the importance of achievement, recognition, and growth (Herzberg et al., 1959), and emphasized the tendency for public employees, in particular, to be influenced by job satisfaction (Maidani, 1991).

As study participants lamented about the limited amounts of positive feedback they had received during their first years in education, several referenced written notes, glowing observation comments, and verbal compliments that their supervisors had given them. Many shared that they still had the positive documents, and interestingly, participants rarely referenced the benefits they had received from formal observations or corrective remarks. As an example, an elementary school principal recalled having a supervisor, early on, who told her, “You just keep doing what you’re doing. You’re doing great things, and you’re making the right moves.” In addition to boosting her confidence, the participant commented that “I think I hung in there because of that,” suggesting that positive affirmations might influence decisions relating to retention. Furthermore, members of the focus groups said that when given the space to make mistakes, they had used the workplace autonomy to take chances and experiment with innovative instructional approaches. Commenting on this point, an experienced superintendent stressed the critical importance of encouraging and supporting teachers in their efforts to try new things.

While participants reflected on the affirmation they had enjoyed early on in their careers, they also talked about specific ways they encouraged newer employees. For example, a high school principal stated that he tried to “make sure that, at least, there’s

one period that is their dream period. It’s like their oxygen.” In addition to providing new teachers with a sense of ownership, the principal indicated that it allowed them “to go home and tell their family that, ‘I teach that there. They created it just for me.’” From regularly providing validation, to creating unique instructional programs for novice teachers, individuals detailed explicit methods for communicating trust and support. Along with regular affirmation, participants also described intentional ways in which they involved new teachers in meaningful organizational activities. For example, one superintendent explained how he took novice educators with him to recruitment fairs, and multiple individuals discussed leveraging the skills of inexperienced educators on committees, at faculty meetings, and in professional development sessions. While the opportunities might not have been as readily available in larger urban or suburban systems, the participants indicated that the small sizes of their rural organizations enabled new teachers to find their professional voices more quickly. In addition to helping individuals develop confidence, the study results showed that regular encouragement established a foundation for empowerment and suggested that affirmation might inspire novice educators to assume leadership responsibilities within their districts. Although new teachers typically have much to learn, superintendents, principals, and aspiring administrators should provide ongoing affirmation in the hope of encouraging future empowerment.

Although often implemented by faculty members in rural organizations, principals have the ability to influence the oversight and resources associated with instructional coaching, mentoring, professional development, and teacher leadership in powerful ways. It is recommended that principals make it clear that they value supporting new teachers. Principals are, first and foremost, instructional leaders who set the example for their employees. Their modeling helps rural districts realize their full potential when it comes to retaining skilled employees (Kohm & Nance, 2009; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009).

This study also highlighted the important role played by rural school superintendents in retaining new teachers. Unlike their counterparts in larger or more suburban districts, rural school superintendents typically have regular occasions to interact with novice educators (Copeland, 2013). From taking inexperienced teachers out to lunch at the beginning of the school year to stopping by classrooms to

sending encouraging notes or emails, superintendents can model an ethic of care for other leaders and staff. However, because their work responsibilities might limit daily contact with new employees, superintendents should purposefully seek out opportunities to create structures that support the retention of teachers. By prioritizing their work with administrative teams and boards of education, rural school superintendents can help to strengthen organizational structures aimed at increasing teacher retention.

Superintendents should leverage the collective influence of their administrative teams and their boards of education to limit turnover. For example, when working with certified school leaders, superintendents should not assume that administrators instinctively know how to communicate support to employees. Because many school leaders begin their careers in rural organizations, much of their learning happens through trial and error (Manard & Wieczorek, 2018). Furthermore, the higher rates of administrative turnover often occurring in rural organizations typically mean that relatively basic levels of leadership development need to be sustained and ongoing (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). By taking the time to help administrators build stronger relationships, strengthen school cultures, and celebrate the successes of others, superintendents can better develop individuals who are intentional about encouraging inexperienced educators (Peel & McCary, 1999). Furthermore, administrative teams should approach the issue of teacher retention like they would any other organizational initiative or challenge. Rather than accepting attrition to be a naturally occurring phenomenon, they should develop specific plans for limiting turnover and increasing workplace satisfaction.

Finally, superintendents should work with local boards of education to organize celebrations and negotiate contractual provisions aimed at limiting teacher turnover. From making personnel appointments to granting tenure, boards have natural opportunities to create systems and celebrations for employees. Superintendents and board members can fully help foster more supportive organizational cultures. By addressing key motivators and hygiene factors, superintendents and boards of education can better hope to retain skilled teachers, and in the process, improve levels of success for their students as well.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges that relate to retaining teachers in rural districts as well as the leadership behaviors that rural school principals, superintendents, and aspiring administrators have used to support new faculty members in their organizations. Not surprisingly, participants cited lower salaries and less lucrative benefit packages as barriers to teacher retention in rural organizations. The responses reinforced the economic argument that individuals choose to enter the field of education when it makes comparative financial sense (Colson & Satterfield, 2018; Loeb & Myung, 2010) and suggested that many rural schools are at a disadvantage when competing with more affluent suburban organizations that are able to offer higher wages (Nguyen, 2020). Further complicating the potential dissatisfaction that can come with lower salaries (Herzberg, 2003) in rural districts, the costs associated with recruiting and developing new teachers can lead to other hygiene factors. For example, because rural districts generally have a more difficult time hiring certified or experienced educators, they must regularly invest time and money into hiring and training new teachers (Brown & Schainker, 2008). If individuals leave their positions after short periods of time, rural districts lose their initial financial outlay and have to reallocate valuable resources for securing replacements. As the financial costs connected with teacher turnover go up, the resources available for purchasing supplies, technology, and equipment decrease, amplifying the likelihood that the hygiene factors related to working conditions will emerge.

Although school leaders—superintendents, in particular—must be aware of economic factors when making salary offers or negotiating collective bargaining agreements, they are likely unable to dramatically increase the funding available in rural settings. Given this reality, rural administrators should redouble their efforts when it comes to less costly motivators and hygiene factors. Rather than focus solely on the economic aspects of teacher retention, rural school leaders should develop active strategies for building relationships, recognizing achievement, and encouraging an ethic of collective support in their organizations. Unlike their counterparts in larger systems, however, rural school administrators have to be more purposeful about boosting the job satisfaction of new teachers using key motivators. Because rural leaders generally have

less administrative support and a more diverse range of responsibilities than principals and superintendents in urban or suburban settings, it is critical that they allocate their time as well as their attention with a high degree of intentionality. As the work of principals and superintendents has become more complex (Björk et al., 2014; Lynch, 2012; Mendel & Mitgang, 2013), it is understandable why rural leaders might feel compelled to focus much of their professional growth on the technical components of scheduling, budgeting, staff supervision, and implementing educational mandates. Yet, because no

school-related factors have proven to be as important as teacher quality when it comes to increasing academic achievement, rural principals and superintendents should ensure their own professional development involves learning related to providing administrative support. This study provided a set of specific leadership behaviors rural school administrators can use to retain skilled educators, and it outlined practical ways for principals and superintendents to nurture desirable work environments.

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