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Promising Practice

Increasing Rural Teacher Preparedness Through a Teacher Residency

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This promising practice describes a rural teacher residency program, developed and implemented in partnership between a university and three rural districts, as an innovative approach to teacher education. The Kern Rural Teacher Residency (KRTR) program in Kern County, California, was a five-year, federally funded grant program at California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB). KRTR was a district-serving teacher education program that paired a rigorous full-year classroom apprenticeship with graduate-level educational content. In a multi-year study that utilized surveys, focus groups, document review, and extant data analysis, findings indicated that, through participation in the residency, completers felt prepared to teach in rural schools. Residency completers have a three-year retention rate of 93% and a five-year retention rate of 86%. Due to the success of KRTR, other districts in the central valley partnered with CSUB to develop their own residency programs.

Teacher residencies address the need to prepare educators to serve in rural communities by allowing for the development of a program that highlights the assets of rural schools. A teacher residency is defined by California State University Bakersfield's (CSUB) Teacher Education Department as a preparation program where teacher candidates are provided with a co-teaching apprenticeship for a full academic year (minimum of 3 days per week). Credential program coursework within a residency is co-constructed and co-taught with university faculty and district leaders and is delivered at school sites in a cohort model. University and district leaders work collaboratively to establish criteria for joint selection of placement sites, mentors, and residents. The teacher residency programs provide financial support to residents including tuition and a living stipend, and residency mentors are compensated at the same rate as induction support providers. Residents commit to teach in the district if they are offered a teaching position.

To have an effective teacher preparation program, it is essential to consider the student population the future educator will be working with. In addition to orienting teacher candidates to the needs and assets of their specialized populations, residencies also prepare these future educators to work through instructional cycles by modeling how to plan (classroom management, objectives, and curriculum), how to implement that plan, how to reflect on their implementation, and most importantly how to amend and apply the information gained

during the reflection process. Residents receive extensive feedback as they work through this instructional cycle. Through their immersion into the classroom and while being supported by teacher leaders, residents who complete the program are more prepared to manage a classroom. Rural students deserve well-prepared, dynamic, and knowledgeable teachers, including teachers early in their career. The Kern Rural Teacher Residency (KRTR) program was designed to build and sustain a pipeline of highly qualified credentialed teachers, through recruitment, mentoring, and induction support, who were committed to teaching in high-need, rural school districts. In the five years of the program, KRTR ultimately prepared 76 teachers through the K-8 teaching credential and master's degree.

The Kern Rural Teacher Residency Program

It is important to contextualize the region, state, and community in which this promising practice of a rural residency was launched. Kern County is situated in the Central Valley of California and is home to 46 school districts ranging from urban to rural and from some of the largest unified districts in the state to single school districts. KRTR represents a partnership between CSU Bakersfield's School of Social Sciences and Education and three Central Valley California districts: Buttonwillow Union School District (BUSD), Lamont Elementary School District (LESB), and Semitropic Elementary School District (SESD), all of which have long-standing relationships with the university. The partnership was

supported in part by a five-year Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant in 2014.

Residency Program Design

When considering the design of KRTR, the leadership team knew that it would be essential to bring in mentor teachers known in their districts as teacher leaders and as engaged community members. One of the greatest assets that rural school districts have are the “homegrown” teachers and administrators who grew up in the area and came back to teach and support the community and its members. Mentor Teachers were selected in partnership between CSUB residency leadership and district leadership. Joint selection of mentor teachers and residents was ultimately one of the greatest strengths of the program. Allowing the local school district and university to work together using cooperative discourse to achieve a shared vision allowed for unification of the program. A growth mindset and dedication to the community and rural education were imperative characteristics for KRTR mentors and residents.

During the academic year, residents co-taught with their Mentor Teacher Monday through Thursday and attended courses at the university campus on Fridays. CSUB employs a modified St. Cloud co-teaching method and trains all mentor teachers and residents in how to co-instruct, co-plan, and co-assess students. Co-teaching requires that the Resident and Mentor Teacher are actively involved and engaged in all aspects of instruction. In addition to being trained in co-teaching strategies, Mentor Teachers also participated in monthly workshops that provided them with training in the Danielson Observation rubric used by CSUB, how to give effective feedback, and mentoring strategies. When mentor teachers were at the 90 minute monthly training the resident would be fully leading the classroom and experiencing solo teaching.

KRTR Residents received immediate and constructive feedback as they worked through this instructional cycle from their university supervisor, mentor teacher, and their peers in their cohort. During the five semester-program, residents earned a multiple subject teaching credential and master’s degree. They also participated in specialized professional development with a STEM integration focus tailored to rural teacher needs.

Each Friday along with the credential program coursework, residents participated in the Resident

Learning Community (RLC). Modeled after a PLC at the district level, these 1-hour meetings allowed residents to build relationships among the cohort through social-emotional exercises and discuss challenges they faced in the classroom to brainstorm solutions. One of the strengths the KRTR leadership team has seen within rural school districts is the collaboration among staff. The RLC was designed to model that collaborative mentality while also giving opportunities to embed readings and discussions around growth mindset and best practices for rural educators. The RLCs were facilitated by the lead faculty and allowed for them to demonstrate how their courses interconnected to all of the aforementioned.

Study Design

WestEd, the evaluation partner for KRTR, conducted a comprehensive longitudinal evaluation of the rural residency. The mixed-methods evaluation combined formative and summative components. The formative component was used to provide ongoing data to grant leadership to improve KRTR. The summative component of the evaluation focused on assessing teacher outcomes (such as teacher preparedness and retention).

To assess preparedness to teach in a rural setting, residents, mentors, graduates, and district administrators participated in focus groups and completed annual surveys. During focus groups, residents were asked about their residency experience, including the various preparation components (Camp BLAST: CSU Bakersfield Leading Adventures in STEM Thinking, coursework/faculty, professional development), working with their mentor teacher, and their interest in teaching in a rural setting. Graduates were asked how prepared they felt during their first year of teaching and teaching in a rural school. District administrators were asked details about how residents were supported by the school and their level of preparation. Narrative data from focus groups were analyzed qualitatively, with researchers engaging in the process of data coding and identification of overall emergent themes across respondent groups (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Analysis of the resident and graduate annual surveys supplemented the narrative findings and allowed triangulation with the qualitative information with survey data.

Rural Preparedness

In the annual evaluation survey, at least 97% of the residents in the surveyed cohorts agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel prepared to teach in rural schools.” During focus groups, year after year, residents and graduates overwhelmingly agreed that KRTR prepared them to teach in rural schools and enhanced their drive to work in rural communities. Many of the residents were themselves from rural areas. One resident discussed wanting to work with students who shared her background, “I can see myself there; the community is Hispanic and connected to our roots. We have a bigger impact on the students.”

Residents and graduates also noted the needs of rural students and the community, the lack of resources in rural communities, and the parents of rural students relying on their children’s teachers. Another resident also reflected on the community’s needs, “Doing the residency in rural areas opened our eyes to what the students needed and how they were affected by their environment, you want to be where you’re needed.” One resident commented on the community need: “The impact that you have on rural district students, you see how much they value their teachers and how much they need you. Once you get a taste of that it’s hard to go back to another education community.” Another resident, not originally from a rural community, noted that her thoughts about working in a rural school changed after participating in the KRTR Program, “Rural schools come with a lot of stereotypes, this changed my perspective on them. The communities are close, they rely on each other.”

Graduates were encouraged to pursue positions at the 3 partner schools but not required to; they were required to take positions at high-needs (Ca Title 1) school. Graduates who accepted positions in one of the partner districts identified a familiarity with the educational context and a fondness of the school culture as reasons they accepted the positions offered. The year-long apprenticeship helped candidates decide if they wanted to teach in a partner district or one similar to it and helped candidates connect with these local rural and high-need communities. Graduates also reported a desire to influence the students they would soon be teaching. “I accepted my position because it was at my placement school, so I had built rapport with the staff and students and I understood the culture and logistics.” Another graduate noted, “I was offered a science position and

I accepted because I wanted to motivate students in the community to pursue a career in science.” Yet another graduate commented, “I accepted the position because I knew I wanted to work in a rural area. I had grown to love the school district I was in and built amazing connections and relationships.”

Significance of the Practice

The successful design and outcomes of KRTR can be seen as a blueprint for future rural residencies. By establishing strong and symbiotic partnership between the universities and rural districts, teacher residencies develop robust pipelines with improved teacher retention and, ultimately, student improved outcomes—especially for students with disabilities and students who are English language learners (National Center for Teacher Residencies, 2019). As a result, KRTR partner districts have been able to staff their schools with more qualified, experienced teachers while relying less on external recruitment.

After five years of implementation, the TQP grant ended and KRTR dissolved into other residency programs at CSUB. One reason KRTR was not sustained in its original form after the grant period was that the three local districts did not have many available positions each year with their small staffing needs. Over the five years, only 18 of the 76 KRTR graduates (24%) secured a position in one of the three partner districts, leaving 76% of graduates to take positions in larger districts. Despite not having many positions available each year, rural districts still have staffing needs and experience tremendous difficulty getting applicants to relocate to a rural community, demonstrating the importance of grow-your-own teacher preparation programs for rural districts. Given the high-quality preparation that comes from training through a residency, the success of KRTR makes a case for consortiums of many small, rural districts to band together and support a teacher residency program. Funding for residencies, particularly those in rural areas, is also needed to staff schools with high-quality educators.

KRTR left a lasting legacy in Kern County in the form of a successful rural residency that produced high-quality educators prepared to teach in high-needs, rural schools. Greenfield Union School District, a local rural district with greater hiring needs, ultimately retained the most KRTR completers and still does to this day. Because of the strong KRTR pool of hirers, they partnered with CSUB to

create a non-grant funded, fully sustainable teacher residency program.

During the final year, researchers asked program participants and leadership to reflect on the legacy of KRTR. Residents and graduates spoke about the community they built among their cohort members and at the schools they were teaching at while in the program, and the impact they will have on their future students. One resident noted, “Everyone in this room will be the teachers, the new teachers that will be looked up to... we’ll catch on a lot quicker than any traditional teacher and will strive a lot faster.” Another resident said, “We are part of a big network of residents and graduates from other cohorts, there is a big family that we can reach out to.”

Despite this residency ending, the legacy of KRTR lives on through five new residency programs.

CSUB established these with local districts that hired KRTR graduates; through the network of KRTR graduates teaching in 14 districts throughout Kern/Tulare County, with many rising into positions of leadership in their districts, and through the sustainable partnerships strengthened because of this program. Within these five residencies many of the elements of KRTR have been embedded, including but not limited to joint selection of mentors and residents, monthly mentor meetings, the RLCs, and placing residents in both a primary and intermediate grade level to increase exposure of great teaching. The lessons learned and best practices of KRTR are now institutional knowledge as many of the CSUB faculty that were KRTR leads now work within the expansion residencies.

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