

Fall 2022

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Recommended Citation

Boulden, R., & Schimmel, C. (2022). Factors that Affect School Counselor Retention in Rural Settings-An Exploratory Study. *The Rural Educator*, 43(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1334>

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Factors that Affect School Counselor Retention in Rural Settings: An Exploratory Study

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Teacher attrition is a well-known issue impacting K-12 schools in the United States. Sizeable research exists highlighting noteworthy factors that promote retention and attrition. However, scant research exists describing these factors within the context of school counselors working in rural settings. Considering this gap, we employed an inductive phenomenological approach to learn more about key attrition and retention factors, utilizing a sample of five rural school counselors employed in rural locales throughout the United States. Two overarching categories were identified: (a) school-based factors and (b) school community factors. Limitations and implications for rural school districts and counselor preparation programs are explored, along with areas for future research.

School counselors play an integral role in promoting student success, achievement, and wellbeing, as supported by the American School Counselor Association ([ASCA], 2019; Boulden et al., 2021), the flagship association of the school counseling profession. Their responsibilities are far-reaching. Perhaps most prominently, school counselors provide direct (i.e., services with students) and indirect services (i.e., services on students' behalf). ASCA (2019) proclaims that 80% of school counselors' time should be devoted to providing direct and indirect services, whereas the remaining percentage can comprise of a combination of (a) fair-share duties (e.g., lunch duty, bus duty), (b) program management, and (c) school support services. Direct services commonly include individual counseling, small-group counseling, and classroom lessons. Teacher collaboration, serving on multidisciplinary teams (e.g., schoolwide MTSS team), parent engagement, and consultation are a few examples of indirect services. While school counselors often have comparable pre-service training to clinical therapists, their roles have distinct differences. Like therapists, school counselors are bound to the American Counseling Association's (2014) code of ethics, along with ASCA's (2016) ethical standards for school counselors. However, while clinical child therapists are positioned to render long-term therapy to children and adolescents, ASCA (2020) asserts that school counselors' scope of practice should consist of brief (e.g., 20-30 minutes), short-term (e.g., roughly 3-6 sessions) counseling services. School counselors are encouraged to refer students to community-based mental health resources, including

appropriate parent/guardian communication, if students' needs extend beyond their scope. Like other licensed school personnel, school counselors employ data-informed decision making. They utilize school data (e.g., grades, number of disciplinary referrals) to identify students needing additional support, and regularly monitor data to determine their intervention's effectiveness on key student outcomes (ASCA, 2019). Also akin to teachers, they ensure that their interventions align with a prescribed set of student standards (i.e., ASCA's *Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success*). Logically, school counselors' duties can differ based on building level. For example, elementary school counselors may focus their efforts on preventative education, career exploration, and early intervention, whereas high school counselors may place a larger emphasis on postsecondary readiness.

School counselors may experience school-based challenges impacting their availability. For instance, Research suggests that school counselors across all settings may be susceptible to experiencing burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). This is likely due to the confluence of unwieldy caseload sizes (ASCA, 2021), inappropriate duties, and perceived lack of support. Moreover, school counselors are often required to fulfill inappropriate duties, such as serving as their school's Section 504 coordinator and standardized test coordinator, the former of which has been found to impede school counselor availability and accessibility (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2020).

School Counselor Impact

Promising empirical research exists extolling school counselors' impact on students' academic, career, and social-emotional development. Academically, Kamrath and Brooker (2017) found that a school counselor-led small group counseling intervention resulted in (a) improved academics and (b) fewer days absent from school. Additionally, Lemberger-Truelove and colleagues (2021) found that a school counselor-led social-emotional learning and mindfulness-based classroom intervention significantly improved students' academic achievement in core subjects. Regarding career development, Mariani and colleagues (2016) examined the impact of a school counselor-led classroom college career readiness intervention. The results suggested marked improvement regarding students' college and career interests, aspiration, and knowledge. Hurwitz and Howell (2014) also found that additional school counselors increased high school students' likelihood of enrolling in college. Lastly, regarding social-emotional development, Gibson and colleagues (2018) investigated the effectiveness of a school counselor-led small group intervention for African American middle school boys. The study found that group participation positively improved student social-emotional skills (e.g., more positive attitude, improved self-discipline). Similarly, Su and Swank (2018) determined that a school counselor-led group mindfulness intervention resulted in increased student attentiveness and improved on-task behavior. Considering well-established challenges regarding conducting educational research (e.g., lack of randomization, sampling, ethical considerations when formulating control groups involving children, time constraints hindering fidelity), it is important to note that the extant literature is not without its limitations. While the current literature is generally encouraging, additional experimental research is warranted to better conceptualize school counselors' impact across an array of domains.

Rural School Counseling

Rural school counseling, much like rurality, is an underexplored yet nascent area of scholarly inquiry (Bright, 2018; Nichols et al., 2018; Schafft, 2016). The limited existing literature highlights perceived strengths and challenges regarding school counselors working in rural locales. For example, Grimes'

(2020) phenomenological study sought to contextualize the "rural school counselor" professional identity. Most participants (i.e., six rural school counselors) cited their school communities "tight-knit feel" as a notable strength. While scant research exists, budding literature suggests that rural school counselors often experience a unique assortment of institutional and structural school-based challenges that may promote attrition. For example, Boulden and colleagues (2022) found that counselors may be overburdened by having to "wear many hats," often resulting in completing tasks incongruent with appropriate school counselor duties. They also found that rural school counselors also may feel isolated, both social and geographically, from fellow school counselors and larger metropolitan regions. This also aligns with Grimes' (2020) phenomenological study, which identified "role incongruence" and "wearing many hats" as school-based factors negatively impacting satisfaction. Many of these professional challenges align with research centered on rural school personnel. For example, Wood et al.'s (2013) survey research study found that rural administrators often leave rural settings due to school community and school-based factors such as feeling isolated, subpar working conditions, salary, and difficulty accessing professional development opportunities, among other reasons. Within the rural teaching literature, inadequate funding due to lower tax bases (Cavanaugh & Swan, 2015; Kaden et al., 2016), lackluster telecommunication (Cotter et al., 2015), perceived isolation (Barton, 2012), and exhaustion due to having to fulfill multiple duties (Goldring et al., 2014; Maele & Houtte, 2012) were noted as primary factors.

The Need for Rural School Counselors

America is undergoing a youth mental health crisis (Mental Health America, 2020). While school counselors are vital across all geographical settings, current research and publications support school counselors' imminent need in rural school communities often largely informed by socioeconomic challenges germane to rurality (e.g., poverty; Leon & Hoffman, 2016; Marré, 2017). In fact, a recent publication by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, titled *Protecting Youth Mental Health*, proclaims that rural youth may be at profound risk of experiencing mental health challenges, considering the COVID-19 pandemic and

preexisting social and economic disparities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Moreover, Graves and colleagues' (2020) study found that rural communities commonly have higher youth suicide rates, and less than 40% of rural communities have mental health facilities that serve children. Preliminary empirical research suggests that children residing in rural locales experience more adverse childhood experiences (e.g., domestic violence, parental substance use) than children residing in urban settings (Crouch et al., 2020). In rural communities, the demand for youth behavioral health services often far exceeds the accessible supply of mental health providers (Bradley et al., 2012). Consequently, rural school counselors, are often the only accessible and qualified mental health support for youth in these communities (Bain et al., 2011; Boulden & Schimmel, 2021; Crumb et al., 2021; Grimes et al., 2014).

Purpose

Rural school counselors serve a pivotal role in their communities. In the wake of the pandemic and inequities predating COVID-19, their role is arguably more critical than ever. Research indicates that rural schools often struggle retaining talent (Glover et al., 2016; Holme et al., 2017; Johnson & Reynolds, 2011; Maele & Houtte, 2012). Moreover, research also contends that rural school communities may face difficulties retaining school counselors, possibly resulting in school counselor shortages (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019; Author, in press). This can stymie rural schools' efforts to follow the Surgeon General's Advisory's recommendation to recruit and train additional school counselors (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Given students' mounting mental health needs, often exacerbated in rural locales, it is imperative that they have access to school counselors, who are trained to render meaningful mental health supports (ASCA, 2020; Author, in press; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). While research

exists exploring rural teacher retention factors (e.g., Huysman, 2018; Ulferts, 2016), scant research exploring rural school counselor retention and attrition factors, specifically. Given their unique positioning as mental health professionals in school settings, it is plausible that exploring school counselor retention could unearth findings otherwise unattainable through the existing rural teacher retention literature. Accordingly, the following research question guided the present study: what are factors inform school counselor retention and attrition in rural school settings?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Polkinghorne (1989) recommends 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological research. The research team recruited a convenience sample of participants meeting the following eligibility criterion: public school counselors currently working in rural school settings for at least two consecutive years. The researchers' used the U.S. Census Bureau's (n.d.) operationalization of "rurality" to ensure potential participants were indeed employed in rural locales. Potential participants were recruited through several methods, including (1) school counseling social media groups and (2) direct email. In response to these solicitation efforts, five school counselors agreed to participate, with all five meeting the study's eligibility criteria. All the participants identified themselves as White. Regarding gender, four identified as female, and one identified as male. One participant earned a doctoral degree, and the other participants earned master's degrees. Participants' experience as school counselors ranged from 4-14 years. Ages ranged from 31-54 years old. Three participants were elementary school counselors, and two were high school counselors. Lastly, school sizes ranged from 337-700 students. Table 1 provides a list of the five participants (names replaced with pseudonyms).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Years of Experience	School Level
Shelby	54	F	White	4	Elementary
Mary	52	F	White	11	High
Betsy	38	F	White	13	High
Lauren	31	F	White	5	Elementary
Donald	41	M	White	14	Elementary

Reflexivity Statement

Reflexivity is a hallmark of qualitative research (Fontana, 2004). Considering this, the research team, composed of two members, include a reflexivity statement, offering our backgrounds and possible biases. The first author is a Black, male school counselor educator with prior post-master's full-time school counseling experience. All of his professional school counseling experiences occurred in urban and suburban settings, possibly creating a more neutral stance. However, he has published in professional journals on rural school counseling. His biases include (a) rural school counselors often wear many hats, thus promoting attrition, and (b) rural school counselors may feel isolated. The second researcher is a White, female school counselor educator with post-master's full time school counseling experience. All of her professional school counseling experience occurred in rural settings, according to the definitions provided in this article. However, the experiences occurred in one of the more populous areas of a rural community. She was born and raised and has lived her entire life in a part of the U.S. categorized as rural. While her connectedness with rurality could have introduced partiality, it also could have deepened her level of understanding regarding school counselors' lived experiences. Her biases include (a) rural school counselors are critical, but several "push factors" make retention a challenge hampering many rural schools, and (b) rural school counselors may be apprehensive to candidly discuss their lived experiences, due to the research team being viewed as "outsiders." We discussed our experiences with rurality, at the beginning of the study, and regularly discussed biases, assumptions, and reactions that could have impacted the study (Ahern, 1999; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining university human subjects research approval, data were collected via two semi-structured focus groups, a format congruent with phenomenological research (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, one research team member facilitated a two-participant focus group, and the other facilitated a focus group with the three remaining participants. Congruent with current scholarly recommendations (Hays & Singh, 2012), both focus groups lasted approximately 60

minutes and occurred through the research team's university-provided web conferencing platform. The study's semi-structured approach helped "to provide a richer picture of a phenomenon under investigation" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 239). Similarly, this approach supported greater interview protocol flexibility to better understand participants' lived experiences (please see Appendix A for interview protocol). Thus, while all participants were asked the same open-ended interview protocol questions, the researchers, when applicable, asked focus group participants clarifying questions to ensure the essence of their lived experiences was appropriately captured.

Data Analysis

Given the study's exploratory nature, the research team employed an inductive approach to data analysis, defined by Thomas (2006) as "approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data" (p. 238), as opposed to a theory-based deductive analysis. Rooted in scholarly recommendations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), the researchers employed several data analysis techniques relevant to transcendental phenomenological research. Research team members independently reviewed both transcripts, familiarizing themselves with the data and participants' lived experiences, and then regularly engaged in conversations to discuss reactions and possible biases. Next, we engaged in horizontalization, identifying individual statements reflecting participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Following, the statements were aggregated into broader categories and themes. Clusters were generally considered "themes" if they were discussed by at least three out of the five school counselors. Lastly, the research team discussed these emergent categories and themes, ultimately resulting in consensus.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Several trustworthiness strategies were employed in the present study. We regularly met to discuss our reactions and possible biases. Moreover, we engaged in "epoche," bracketing assumptions and biases to obtain a more objective understanding of the

phenomenon explored (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, consistent with qualitative research, we regularly discussed possible biases and how they could have impacted interpretation of the study's data (Ahern, 1999; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Findings

Two categories emerged from the data highlighting school counselor attrition and retention factors: (a) school-based factors and (b) school-community factors. The first category, school-based factors, includes the following themes: (a) sense of support, (b) multiple roles, (c) professional advocacy, and (d) student impact. The second, school-community factors, contained four themes: (a) relationships, (b) community mental health access, (c) connection with rurality, and (d) state-level school counseling associations. These categories and themes are detailed below.

Category 1: School-Based Factors

In the present study, rural school counselors discussed salient school-based factors impacting retention and attrition. The following themes emerged: sense of support, multiple roles, professional advocacy, and school counselor impact.

Sense of Support: "There's a lot of value that goes into it."

All school counselors discussed how feeling supported by various school personnel impacted their desire to remain in their respective schools. Some school counselors felt supported by fellow school counselors. Donald stated:

In [county] alone, we're a very close-knit family of school counselors, and I know if there's ever a need, I can call one of my colleagues. [I appreciate that] they're always just a phone call away and they're always there to help.

Lauren commented on their supportive school environment and how it allowed her to devote more time toward addressing pressing student issues:

We've done a lot of work, within the school building, with building a support team. We now have an in-house school psychologist, a social worker, and a family support worker. So, because of that, and because of some evidence-based program that has been purchased for us and...I'm able to focus completely on my counseling program...but, I think if it wasn't for

the work that was done with the support system here within the school...I wouldn't be able to spend nearly as much time focus solely on the school counseling program.

Mary discussed how their school's relatively small size allowed them to serve in a leadership role, increasing their sense of support:

In the smaller setting, my voice is amplified as a counselor. I don't have to fight six counselors and 12 administrators to have something heard. If we're talking about a direction for the school or how we tackle a problem, my voice is pretty important at that table. So that bit of leadership is really important to me, too.

However, not all school counselors expressed this relatively-strong sense of support, particularly by school administration. Betsy discussed how lack of support can promote attrition:

I think this [lack of administrator support] leads to a lot of burnout down here, for sure. And, you know, people kind of know which districts have supportive admin and which ones don't. And it shows in a lot of ways, as you know, with a lack of support [for] kids [and] their outcomes.

Moreover, Mollie described how not having additional school-based mental health resources adversely impacted their sense of longevity in their rural setting:

I will say, being the only [school counselor in the building] with [over 400] students and it seems like 800 faculty members that need something all the time, the thought has crossed my mind this year that, if I don't get help, I don't know how much longer I can do this, in this setting. It's just hard.

This longstanding issue (i.e., lack of mental health resources) plaguing rural schools can place a heavier burden on school counselors as, often, there simply are not enough trained school-based mental health professionals available to render appropriate counseling services (e.g., small group counseling, collaborating with guardians to refer students to long-term community-based mental health services as appropriate).

Contemporary educational research underscores the salience of feeling supported (Berry et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2015; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kraft et al., 2016), especially in rural settings (Boulden et al., 2022; Goodpaster et al., 2012; Hansen, 2018). Thus, it is logical that the present study found "sense of support" to promote retention. However, a novel finding was how working in a rural setting increased

school counselors' role as a vocal and valued leader within their relatively small school, thereby begetting a sense of support. This empirical finding complements Wimberly and Brickman's (2014) conceptual article highlighting rural school counselors' leadership potential, along with professional guidelines (ASCA, n.d.-a).

Multiple Roles: "If you see the ball laying there, somebody's got to pick it up and run with it, so you just do it."

Four school counselors discussed having to "wear many hats" to support their schools' copasetic functioning, largely serving as an attrition factor. It is not uncommon for rural school counselors, like rural educators, to be asked to perform duties outside of their professional parameters. Thus, these non-counseling duties, such as bus duty, lunch duty, and serving as the school's standardized testing coordinator, often fall into school counselors' lap. Mary reported:

Well, staff across the board is slim in a rural setting, and so there's so many mandates put down on us from the state that we've got to cover as a school that no one administrator could do all of it. The principal can't be responsible for all of it. So, we have to be a team, and so I have to pick up some things that would be considered "non-counseling duties," but without it, the school's not going to run.

Due to these multiple competing demands, school counselors can often feel stretched thin. For instance, Shelby commented:

[On those days] where it's like, "Mrs. [last name]." "Mrs. [last name], I need to see you." "Mrs. [last name], I need to see you." "Mrs. [last name], can I see you?" "Mrs. [last name], when can I see you?" And then I've got to this class lesson, and then I've got to do lunch duty, and then I have this IEP meeting after school...and now, 20 kids want to know when I'm going to see them. And I'm just like, "Just stop for a minute."

This tendency for rural educators to "wear many hats" is a common refrain in the extant rural educational literature (Goldring et al., 2014; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Wood et al., 2013). This notion is also reflected in the extant school counseling (Mullen et al., 2018, 2020) and rural school counseling (Author, in press; Grimes, 2020) literature. Considering these multiple competing demands, it is

logical that school counselors in the present study report intermittent burnout, which has been found to correlate with school counselor job dissatisfaction (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). While little research exists, it is plausible that this job dissatisfaction could lead to attrition.

Professional Advocacy "A lot of [people] don't know what we do in 2021."

Consistent with the previous theme, three school counselors shared how being required to fulfill multiple roles, many of which are misaligned with contemporary professional standards, require intentional professional advocacy. Moreover, many colleagues possessed antiquated perspectives regarding appropriate school counselor roles, which is not uncommon. While professional advocacy is meritorious, having to constantly inform others of one's role can be burdensome, which, compounded with other factors, can promote attrition. For example, as expressed by Lauren:

Well, a lot of [people] just don't know what we do in 2021, so getting the information out there and making sure they understand what a comprehensive school counseling program is and what that looks like in elementary and middle and high [school settings] is a big piece, I think.

These outdated viewpoints may spring school counselors into action, helping change the narrative regarding school counselor roles and responsibilities. Betsy described the benefits of professional advocacy in their school setting:

[Professional advocacy has] been an opportunity to educate [colleagues], but, at the same time, present the ASCA model and all of the up to date information [on] how to be a proper school counselor...so, that's been a real advantage.

This theme is consistent with the school counseling profession's understanding of professional advocacy (American School Counselor Association, 2019; Clemens et al., 2011), defined by Cigrand and colleagues (2015) as "school counselors' efforts to promote awareness and support for their professional role" (p. 10). The present study indicated that, due to being required to fulfill multiple competing roles, school counselors must engage in professional advocacy. School counselors explained how colleagues (e.g., administrators) may lack awareness of contemporary school counselor roles and duties, as supported by current literature (Havlik et al., 2019).

This often required them to tactfully engage in efforts to enlighten colleagues on appropriate school counseling duties and roles. Nonetheless, seemingly, engaging in professional advocacy increased school counselors' ability to address pressing student needs while simultaneously developing a comprehensive school counseling program congruent with contemporary standards (Salina et al., 2013).

Student Impact: "You're there to make a difference."

All participants expressed immense gratification in helping improve student and school community outcomes, serving as a key retention factor. For example, Betsy working in an elementary school described enjoying getting "direct interaction" from students daily. She continued:

Seeing them learn skills that you know will help them throughout their and into adulthood [is very rewarding]. Sometimes, you're teaching them skills that some adults don't know. So, having those direct interactions and knowing that you're teaching elementary schoolers things that they'll take with them their whole life [is gratifying].

Category 2: School Community Factors

In addition to school-based attrition and retention factors, school counselors discussed notable factors within the broader school community. Specifically, school counselors described: relationships, community mental health access, connection with rurality, and state-level school counseling associations. We discuss these themes below.

Relationships: "It's much easier to get to know [families] and be part of their lives."

Four school counselors shared how their school community's rurality supports building relationships with students' families. These four school counselors viewed these blurred professional—personal lines as a net positive related to remaining in rural settings. Many enjoyed encountering current students, former students, and parents at recreational events and other locations within their respective municipalities, aligning with prior rural educational (Byun et al., 2012; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Goodpaster et al., 2012; Stambaugh & Wood, 2015) and school counseling (Boulden et al., 2021; Bright, 2018; Grimes, 2020) research. For instance, Mary stated:

If I go to a baseball game, I'm right there with the rest of the community. They know who I am, so that makes it easier for me to be a resource for them. I, to this day, don't know how counselors do it in those really big schools, because it just seems like I would go crazy trying to learn everybody.

For most, living in the same jurisdiction as their rural school was a choice, one that many found beneficial, personally and professionally. Shelby shared the satisfaction of encountering former students within their rural setting:

And when we first moved here, my oldest son was in fifth grade. And now that the graduating class has come and gone a couple years ago. I've seen those kids go through fifth grade on to graduation...and to see those kiddos to go on and do other things with their lives now, or they're working in town [is quite satisfying]. You go to Walmart and you're like, "Oh, hey, look at you!"

Community Mental Health Access: "If I needed them, it usually took them over an hour to get there."

All school counselors described the mounting student health needs and, thus, the necessity of community-based mental health resources to render in-depth counseling services. A paucity of accessible and available community mental health agencies in rural settings is not an uncommon phenomenon, as cited by numerous studies centered on rurality (Blackstock et al., 2018; Bradley et al., 2012; Holly et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2012) and rural school counseling (Author, in press; Grimes, 2020). Mary described their experiences with mental health resources in their respective community:

The school I was at, formerly, was in a much more rural area than where I am now, and those [mental health] services just were not available. And community support wasn't great...if I suggested that a student needed some outside help, more than likely, parents weren't going to go for that.

Donald encountered similar obstacles in their rural setting, stating that "our mental health resources in the community are very slim. I mean, we have some, but they're overwhelmed, and so the wait list is huge, and they don't have enough time for all the kids that they really need to see."

Community mental health agencies in rural settings often encounter a service demand far

exceeding the supply of qualified mental health professionals (Pendse & Nugent, 2017). Thus, it is logical that school counselors in the present study noted this challenge. These unaddressed mental health needs can manifest in school settings (e.g., disruptive behavior, difficulty regulating emotions) which may promote school counselor attrition due to having to regularly “put out fires” (Morrow & Villodas, 2018) Additionally, as supported by empirical school counseling research, the dearth of community mental health resources combined with both (a) mounting student mental health needs and (b) with large caseloads, often contribute to school counselor burnout and exhaustion, possibly serving as a key attrition factor (Bardhoshi et al., 2014).

Connection with Rurality: “I want to stay rural.”

Participants offered a nuanced understanding of rurality factors that support school counselor retention and attrition. Unlike prior rural school counseling research, many of the present study’s participants described a sense of connectedness with the social and geological aspects associated with rurality. School counselors expressed a strong rural identity, highlighting quintessential features drawing them to the local. All school counselors expressed a favorable identity with their rural locale, for various reasons. Shelby commented favorably on their community’s close-knit feel:

After being here [for a while], knowing the person that works at Walmart, knowing my waiter at the restaurants, and being able to chat with the people in the pharmacy line, I like that. I don’t want to be a nobody in a huge town. You know? I want to know my neighbors and the kids at the park.

Lauren remarked similarly, expressing deep connection with rurality’s geographical aspects. She commented:

I’m an outdoors [person] and I want to be able to get out and see the birds and see the wildlife and have it around me, and so that’s a big part of it. I mean, if I [worked at] a bigger school or a more urban setting, I would have to live [in a rural setting and I would commute.

Participants’ positive commentary counters Hansen’s (2018) study, which found that rural principals may view “rurality,” along with additional considerations, as an attrition factor. This may be partially attributable to the vast differences in school

counselor and principal scopes of practice. However, it is important to note that, while rurality was a retention factor for school counselors in the present study, other school counselors may not view these geological aspects as favorably. This may be particularly true for school counselors who have little personal or professional experiences residing or working in rural locales.

State-level School Counseling Associations: “That has been a huge support.”

Three school counselors described how state-level school counseling associations supported their professional development and connectedness with fellow school counselors through their states, despite vast geographical differences. As stated by Betsy:

I look forward to conferences every year, because I can get out of my bubble and go talk to some other people, and just be involved with the profession in those ways. And in my area, there are several rural counselors at other schools around, and we’re kind of our own little team.

These three school counselors extolled their SSCA’s ability to unite school counselors across the state, thereby promoting a sense of togetherness across vast geographical distances. This compliments Wilson and colleagues’ (2018) study on rural school counselor supervision in which they recommend school counselors join SSCAs, thereby creating additional peer support networks perhaps not otherwise attainable in their rural settings. In fact, these SSCAs may help rural school counselors develop their school counseling program in a manner that is consistent with professional standards (ASCA, 2019; Author, in press). Given the research suggesting that rural educators and school communities often feel isolated (Author, in press; Lock et al., 2012), these formalized networks appear to play a pivotal role in mitigating this proclivity and creating opportunities for meaningful professional development, collaboration, and peer socialization.

Implications

The present study offers meaningful implications for rural school districts, administrators, and counselor preparation programs. Firstly, to promote retention, rural school districts can increase the allocation of school counselors assigned at each school. This would result in smaller caseloads, likely mitigating possible burnout, exhaustion, and attrition. Moreover, rural school districts can ensure that

school counselors have professional development funds to attend regional, state, and national-level school counseling conferences, providing enriching opportunities to connect with fellow colleagues and learn best practices to implement in their respective schools. Given the salience of feeling supported, as noted previously, school districts can collaborate to develop online professional learning communities, which have been found to promote increased connectedness and sense of support (Durr et al., 2020). Similarly, school districts may consider creating formalized networking and mentoring opportunities among novice and seasoned inter-district school counselors. Lastly, given the generally positive research citing “Grow Your Own” Educator programs’ efficacy with teachers (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2018) and school psychologists (Schmitz et al., 2021), school districts can develop strategic partnerships with universities in rural settings (e.g., Author & Author, in press) to recruit counselors-in-training who may be more drawn to working in rural settings, perhaps promoting eventual retention.

Meaningful implications also exist for rural administrators. Given the propensity for rural school counselors to feel isolated (Boulden et al., 2022), administrators can explore viable pathways to support their ability to connect with colleagues in rural, urban, and suburban settings, such as by funding their SSCA membership dues or their ability to attend state- and/or national school counseling conferences. Moreover, rural administrators are encouraged to familiarize themselves with ASCA, contemporary school counseling, and appropriate school counselor roles. Similarly, administrators should collaborate with their school counselor to develop agreements that outline school counselors’ use of time and student-centered priorities for the school year. Lastly, administrators should ensure that school counselors’ voices and expertise are valued within their school communities. For instance, administrators can invite the school counseling department chair to serve on the school’s leadership team. Additionally, administrators can consult with school counselors regarding pertinent academic and social-emotional needs.

Regrettably, rurality is often underexplored in counselor preparation programs (Breen & Drew, 2012), which, if unaddressed, can result in eventual rural school counselor attrition. Considering this, counselor preparation programs can infuse curricula focused on leadership and advocacy within rural

settings. This is particularly poignant as many participants acknowledged their role in school leadership and as a singular voice for student mental health in their schools. For example, students can be tasked with interviewing a rural school counselor to better contextualize rural school counselor leadership and advocacy. Lastly, as supported by prior research (Author, in press; Tran et al., 2020) and the present study’s findings, counselor preparation programs can provide meaningful field experiences located in rural locales, perhaps increasing students’ practical familiarity with rurality during their graduate studies. These pre-service rural experiences may support school counselor retention upon entering the profession.

Limitations

With any study, there are limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, while research supports the utilization of smaller sample sizes in phenomenological research (Polkinghorne, 1989), especially when adequate saturation is reached (Morse, 2015). However, given rurality’s various denotations (Sher, 1977), it is possible that the findings do not align with all rural settings. Additionally, all participants identified as “White.” Thus, participants’ experiences may be inconsistent with school counselors of color working in rural settings. Next, while participants verified the accuracy of the focus group transcriptions, the researchers did not reconnect with them to verify the accuracy of the study’s findings. Lastly, the study occurred amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this global crisis may have impacted rural school counselors’ roles and responsibilities (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In sum, school counselors serve a critical role in supporting students in rural communities with respect to their academic, social-emotional, and career development. Given the challenges imperiling many rural school communities, it is critical that students have access to this important school-based mental health resource. Using a phenomenological methodology, we identified rural school counselor retention and attrition factors, resulting in two overarching categories. Our findings largely confirm, clarify, and extend the extant literature on rural educator retention and attrition. While additional research is warranted, the study serves as a first step

in helping rural administrators and school districts curtail this pressing issue.

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Suggested Citation:

Boulden, R., & Schimmel, C. (2022). Factors that affect school counselor retention in rural settings: An exploratory study. *The Rural Educator*, 43(4), 1-14.

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