

# Perspectives of Potential and Current Teachers for Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention

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# Executive Summary

South Carolina, a predominately rural state, suffers from severe teacher shortages. The state's struggles, unfortunately, are not anomalous; rather, they are emblematic of a larger problem: teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas. Despite the exacerbated teacher recruitment and retention challenges facing many rural schools, there exists a relative dearth of research on the topic when compared to research dedicated to other educational environments (e.g., urban schools). There is significant need, however, to better understand factors contributing to rural educator shortages and to explore potential means of mitigating/ameliorating those factors. This report aims to do just that. This report synthesizes the results of four studies conducted by faculty research fellows from the University of South Carolina's Center for Innovation in Higher Education and Department of Educational Leadership and Policies. The goal of this report is to improve our understanding of rural teacher recruitment and retention in South Carolina by studying the perceptions of potential teachers and incorporating the voices of current teachers working in hard-to-staff areas of the state. Based on the review of these studies, we suggest adopting the following course of action to improve teacher recruitment and retention the state's rural areas: increase rural teacher salaries, provide rural-specific teacher education training and development to prospective and current teachers, provide rural-specific administrative support to teachers, highlight rural advantages for rural educator recruitment and provide community development and resource support, and highlight rural advantages for rural educator recruitment.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, national media outlets have focused increasingly on teacher shortage concerns, mentions increasing from less than 500 in 2013 to almost 4,000 in 2015 (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017). While some point to national statistics to highlight that the teaching supply is growing proportionate to the student population (Taie & Goldring, 2017), others argue this is not the case, supplying evidence to suggest a shrinking teacher supply, at least for specific subject matters (e.g., math, sciences, and special education) and in particular geographic contexts (e.g., rural communities) irrespective of subject (Malkus, Mulvaney-Hoyer, & Sparks, 2015). According to Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2016), the high attrition rate of current teachers and the decreased enrollment in teacher education programs contribute to these shortages most significantly. They further found that teachers in “high-poverty, high-minority school[s]” (p. 4) and those in the southern region of the United States have higher attrition rates than teachers in any other schools or regions. These findings suggest that national teacher shortage statistics can obscure the severity of state-to-state, district-to-district teacher shortages.

The situation is often worse in predominately rural states like South Carolina. Statistics have shown that teacher supply problems are often more severe in high-poverty rural communities, many of which have a high proportion of underperforming minority and impoverished students (Schaefer et al., 2016). According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2012, almost 40 percent of remote rural schools experienced significant challenges in filling positions for every subject matter, with teacher turnover being higher in these schools than their suburban or urban counterparts (Malkus et al., 2015). Similarly, rural administrators have reported having very few (if any) candidates in their selection pools (Jimerson, 2003). This substantiates the common argument that one of the most severe challenges facing rural school districts is the attraction of high-quality teachers (Miller, 2008). A natural question would be why?; what factors hamper rural schools’ abilities to attract teachers? Research suggests that a variety of barriers prevent adequate recruitment of potential rural teachers. Some obstacles include: eroding tax base and lower relative salary offerings in rural districts (Tran, 2018); small community size (Monk, 2007); distance from major population centers (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014); remoteness, geographic isolation, and high percentage of student poverty (Schaefer, Mattingly, & Johnson, 2016); and poor classroom resources (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002).

This report synthesizes the results of four studies conducted by faculty research fellows from the University of South Carolina’s Center for Innovation in Higher Education and Department of Educational Leadership and Policies to improve our understanding of the perceptions of potential as well as current rural teachers on the rural teacher supply problem, with an assumption that their voices and perspectives are critical to helping address potential shortages in these hard-to-staff areas of South Carolina. Addressing the issue of teacher shortage in South Carolina is a two-part process. It requires focusing on both the recruitment of new teachers and the retention of current teachers. Consequently, the studies report on the perspectives of both potential rural teachers and current teachers in rural South Carolina school districts to provide insight on what would attract to and retain teachers in rural regions of the state. The findings from these studies can be used to provide implications for higher education, K-12, and government agencies.

## SOUTH CAROLINA TEACHER SHORTAGE

Schools in largely rural and economically struggling states acutely experience the adverse effects of teacher attrition (Tran, 2018; Tran & Smith, 2018a). South Carolina is no exception. According to The Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA), “finding new teachers can be difficult for many districts, particularly with the state’s ongoing trend of more teachers leaving, more vacancies to fill, and fewer [South Carolina] graduates eligible for teacher certification each year” (CERRA, 2018, p. 5). In their annual teacher supply report, CERRA notes that for the 2017-18 school year, there were 550 vacant South Carolina teaching positions after 6,705 of the 53,145.86 public school teachers did not return to their positions and project an overall teacher shortage of 2,487 teachers in South Carolina by 2027-28. The state’s impoverished rural districts are affected by this trend particularly, often experiencing greater difficulty in attracting teachers than their urban counterparts. The 5-year (from 2012-13 to 2016-17) teacher turnover rate for rural low-income districts was 13.9%, while the turnover rate for non-rural low-income districts over the same period was 10.5% (CERRA, 2018). These findings correspond with the trend of teachers from the southern region of the United States either relocating or quitting the profession entirely at higher rates than those of other regions (Sutcher et al., 2016) and highlight the importance of not only focusing on recruiting new teachers, but also retaining current ones.

## RECRUITMENT: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POTENTIAL TEACHERS

The state of South Carolina has invested millions of dollars towards addressing the difficult task of attracting teachers to many of its rural and impoverished schools. As stated previously, there are many barriers to recruiting new teachers to rural communities, which places many rural school districts at competitive disadvantages when

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compared to urban and less isolated schools (Sutcher et al., 2016). Appropriately, in response to the U.S. Department of Education's report on rural education, University Council for Educational Administration's (UCEA) top recommendation was to stabilize the rural educator workforce by offering appropriate incentives (UCEA, 2018). However, to better understand what incentives may influence rural teacher employment, one needs to be better understand the factors that influence those employment decisions.

### Teacher Education Majors on Rural Teaching

Current research in South Carolina sheds light on factors that affect rural teacher recruitment. For instance, Tran, Hogue, and Moon (2015) surveyed 74% of all college students (n=64) in an early childhood (P-2<sup>nd</sup> grade) teacher preparation program at a South Carolina public university to gain insight on their predispositions to teach in state-identified high-needs or "hard-to-staff" districts (i.e., turnover=>12%), most of which are rural. The survey included 17 Likert-scale type questions,<sup>1</sup> the responses to which underwent an exploratory factor analysis that reduced the items to 5 factors: 1) confidence in their own ability to teach students who struggle academically, 2) desire to teach locally, 3) positive perception of rural environments, 4) sense of public service, and 5) openness to teaching in a district with severe teacher turnover. Results from an ordinal logistic regression with the aforementioned 5 factors as predictors found that early childhood majors *sense of confidence in their ability* and *openness to teaching in a hard-to-staff district* were statistically significant predictors of respondents' stated willingness to

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<sup>1</sup> These questions inquired about numerous predispositions of respondents including their self-perceptions of their own ability teaching students who struggle academically, perceptions of the academic abilities of children in rural schools, their perceptions of a high quality of life in rural communities, etc.

work in rural, hard-to-staff districts for at least five years. Years of research has suggested that teachers often report feeling unprepared to work in differing contexts by their teacher education training (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Accordingly, Tran, Hogue and Moon's (2015) findings suggest the importance of context-specific teacher education preparation as a mechanism for improving and preparing teachers for rural teaching.

Universities and teacher preparation programs are lacking in this area currently. While approximately 59% of respondents indicated that they had observed a class in a rural school at some point during their teacher education program, only about 11.5% noted internship experience at a rural school. When the sample is delimited to only juniors and seniors at the tail end of their teacher education program, still only 20% of respondents indicated they had interned at rural schools. Of those respondents who had interned at rural schools, only one expressed "somewhat disagreement" with their willingness to work in a rural school system, while the remaining noted various levels of agreement (i.e., 50% somewhat agree, at 17% indicating agreement and strong agreement respectively). The responses seem to suggest that providing teachers-in-training with increased exposure to rural school settings would increase the likelihood of their choosing to work in a rural school district.

Beyond the 17 Likert-scale items, the researchers asked respondents several open-ended questions, including inquiring into their primary motivation to becoming teachers. In response, the majority of respondents (56.2%) described a student-centered motivation for considering teaching including a desire to help students learn, make a difference in children's lives, and help children succeed. When asked what factors may affect their decision to teach in a rural district experiencing a teacher shortage, many noted pay as a baseline, but many also re-emphasized the influence of their primary teaching motivation. For instance, one respondent noted

"I believe pay is one factor but that is not a breaking factor. I want to inspire children and being paid the best is not the only thing that matters. I did not pick this major for the pay (obviously)."

Administration, location, distance of commute, workload, and community atmosphere were among other identified influential factors, as evinced by one respondent's hypothetical questions for a rural school's hiring committee: "Do I get the grade level I prefer? Will there be apprehension if my ethnicity does not reflect the majority of my students? Would I be given greater responsibilities ... than in a high SES district at less or equal pay?"

Common themes from Tran, Hogue, and Moon (2015) will re-emerge in the subsequently discussed studies. These themes include the necessity for rural context specific training in teacher preparation programs, the importance of administrative support, the influence of adequate pay as a baseline need that must be met, and the need to support teachers with acclimating to the rural community.

## Monetary Considerations for College Students for Rural Teaching

To specifically examine the influence of financial factors on education majors' consideration of teaching in a rural school district with the most severe teacher turnover in the state of South Carolina (henceforth referred to as the rural district), Tran and Smith (2018a) randomly sampled 403 college students (this time across all majors) from a public university in South Carolina. The average reported minimum annual salary needed for respondents to seriously consider teaching at the rural sample district reported was \$47,606.60. This desired salary surpasses the average beginning teacher salary offered by South Carolina public school districts at the time of the study (\$33,057.00) and represents a \$14,549.60 (36.07%) gap—a statistically significant difference,  $t(453)=2.53$ ,  $p=.012$ . The percentage difference between respondents' minimum salary requirement with the beginning teacher salary offered by the rural district is even wider at 40.36%. Taken together, these responses suggest that present salary levels will need to be improved substantially in order to attract many into teaching at rural, hard-to-staff schools. To put the figures into context, the students' stated required amount of \$47,606.60 is not too far off from the reported average starting salary for bachelor's degree graduates, which was \$50,516 in 2017 (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018).

In addition to the survey, Tran and Smith (2018a) interviewed 10 undergraduate students from the larger sample in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the quantitative results. Seventy percent of the interviewees were college seniors with an average age of 24 and an average annual parent income of \$54,000. Their majors included business, criminal justice, biology, physical education exercise science, commercial music, elementary education, computer science, and communications. The interviewees indicated that low pay—particularly the low pay of rural districts—beyond any other factor, dissuaded them from pursuing a career in education. For example, a male military veteran participant majoring in business management and marketing explained:



Traditionally it is perceived that teachers are not paid enough.... they feel undervalued and underpaid. I looked into teaching as a career pretty strongly... and every person I talked to, be it a grade school teacher or college professor, told me the same thing – that it was it was a lot of work, it was an unstable work environment, and the pay was very poor for the amount of work that you put in.

Another participant, a female communications major, explained:

The most important factors are pay and location. The place I choose to teach at is also going to be where I choose to live at. I want to be comfortable. I always hear that teachers don't get paid a lot, but they are the ones teaching people – so I don't understand why they don't get paid a lot.

Similarly, a female majoring in biology with career aspirations of becoming a veterinarian explained she has considered teaching high school biology as a backup plan and added, “The thing that is keeping me out of teaching is how little they are paid and how undervalued they are.” All of the students interviewed related low pay with a lack of respect for the profession, which served as a deterrent for their entry into teaching.

Fortunately, the quantitative and qualitative findings both support that college students are willing to enter the teaching profession at a lower starting salary than they anticipate earning in their current career trajectory. The caveat, however, is that the pay must be within a reasonable proximity from their current anticipated post-graduation salary earnings. Based on this information, one might infer that students majoring in highly compensated fields would be more difficult to recruit without more substantive changes to teacher salary offerings.

Ultimately, Tran and Smith's (2018a) study shows that tangible steps towards mitigating teacher attrition and recruitment

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woes in rural areas are available to institutions and employers. Educational institutions and teacher certification programs should work in concert with rural school districts to increase college students' exposure to rural classrooms, and school districts/the state government should consider increasing salaries.

### Relative Importance of Employment Factors for College Students' Rural Teaching Interest

Tran and Smith (2018b) conducted an analysis to examine which factors most influence college students' consideration of teaching at the rural school district. Unlike Tran, Hogue, and Moon's study, this study relied on a utility analysis, and did the following: 1) asked respondents to compare the relative importance of a host of different conditions important to teacher recruitment (as opposed to a Likert-type ranking where each condition is ranked separately) and 2) surveyed college students across majors, not only those in a teacher education program. The randomly sampled group of 403 students studied in Tran and Smith's (2018a) study participated in the survey and ranked the importance of 25 different employment factors towards their employment consideration at the rural district. Tran and Smith (2018b) obtained population data to adjust case sampling weights to corresponding totals in the population.

According to respondents, the most important attribute was *school administrative support*. Boyd et al. (2011) define administrative support as "...the extent to which principals and other school leaders make teachers' work easier and help them to improve their teaching" (p. 305). *Self-confidence in being an effective teacher in a rural district* and *strong sense of*

*connection to students* ranked as second and third most important, respectively. This analysis offers quantitative evidence to support what has been argued qualitatively in teacher recruitment literature, namely that "[a]lthough money can help, teachers are primarily attracted by principals who are good instructional leaders, by like-minded colleagues who are committed to the same goals... and by having learning supports that

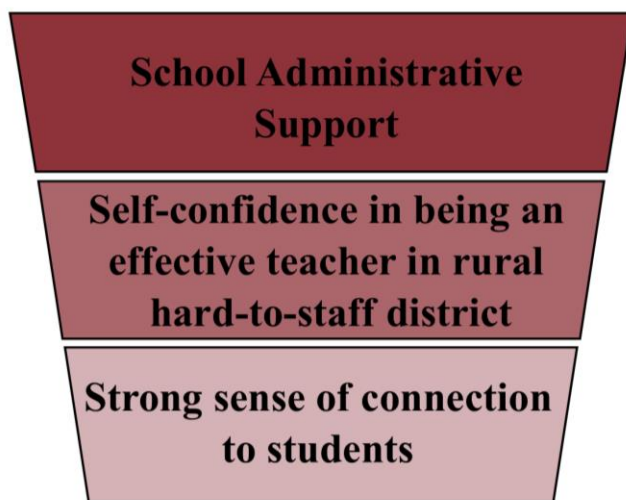


Figure 1. Three most important factors considered by surveyed potential teachers

enable them to be effective” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 66). Figure 1 provides a visual display of these top three desired attributes.

Supportive administration is a huge factor when choosing a school to teach at because they [administrators] become a middleman between the district and the school themselves. They are the ones that go to bat for you [as a teacher]. With families, if you have a supportive school administration and have a problem, they should be the ones you [as a teacher] should be able to go to.

It is important to emphasize that one should not construe the results of this study to mean that base salary and salary increases do not matter. Indeed, even though pecuniary factors did not rank among the top employment factors in this study, raises ranked sixth overall, and raises and salary were ranked second and third, respectively, among education majors. Rather, what the findings seem to suggest is that money alone will not fix the

problem; it currently serves as a baseline deterrent, not as an attraction.

While the results of Tran and Smith’s (2018a) interview of college students of all majors revealed that for some students the rural teacher salary deficiency was insurmountable, most commonly perceived a lack of administrative support from leaders and rural contextual barriers as further hindering interest in teaching in the rural school district. For example, a senior criminal justice major that recently changed her major from special education explained

There are a lot of changes going on in the school atmospheres and the way they handle stuff. I know from when I worked in a special education classroom [as an aide] that nothing is really the same from day-to-day because of the type of students we were dealing with. A lot of the decisions that the teacher had to make working with the students, you really need that school administration back up to be supportive because things change so often in the special education field.

When asked about employment in a rural school district, she went on to explain that if she were to pursue a teaching career, she would only do so at a school where she could sense administrative support for teachers and their decisions. A 30-year-old senior who returned to college from a career in banking to study elementary education noted:

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themselves. They are the ones that go to bat for you [as a teacher]. With families, if you have a supportive school administration and have a problem, they should be the ones you [as a teacher] should be able to go to.

He cited school administrative support, particularly in resource-limited rural districts, as a means to lessening some of the non-instructional duties and tasks placed on teachers. Lastly, a senior biology major noted that a lack of administrative support does not help the perception that teachers are overworked and undervalued and causes hesitation in her pursuit of teaching, especially in rural contexts where teachers are more isolated from professional support. This study, Tran and Smith (2018b), reaffirms that while money matters to prospective teachers, other critical factors, such as administrative support, are also important and merit attention and improvement.

## CURRENT TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Rurality is often perceived as a deficit or a challenge and consequently serves as a barrier for recruitment and retention. Some have proposed, however, that moving away from a deficit model and viewing rurality as an asset may be a promising strategy for teacher recruitment and retention. Almost 600 surveyed rural superintendents rated “*promoting the advantages of teaching and living in the area*” as more realistically effective than housing/relocation assistance and competitive salaries/benefits (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). Stated advantages by educators include a stronger connection to the rural environment, opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of impoverished students, more control over school decisions, and empowerment for experimentation.

Similarly, Maranto and Shuls (2012) examined the websites of 50+ rural school districts facing geographic teacher shortages and found most did not advertise *non-materialistic* incentives for teacher recruitment. These incentives included advantages such as freedom in the classroom and opportunity to develop stronger relationship with students. The only exception was KIPP Delta, a charter school in rural Kansas that provided much more information, including non-materialistic incentives for recruitment purposes, and subsequently reported much more success attracting teaching candidates despite being located in an economically disadvantaged location where neighboring school districts struggle to recruit candidates.

## Rural Teacher Talent Management from the Perspectives of Current Rural Educators.

To capture the recruitment and retention insights of present rural educators, particularly on rural advantages that can be highlighted for employment purposes to their school, Tran, Gause, Ylimaki, and Hardie (2018) obtained data from 35 current rural educators in five districts

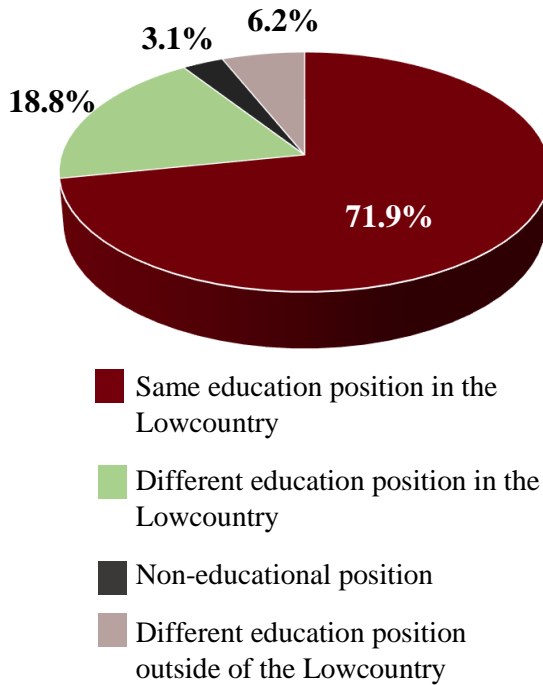


Figure 1. Five-Year Career Plan for Current Rural Educators

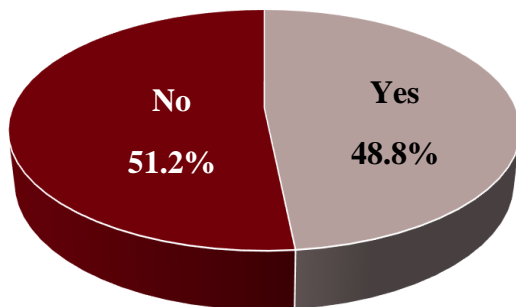


Figure 2. Percentage of participants who had practicum or student teaching experiences in a rural setting

identified by the state as facing some of the most severe teacher shortages (i.e., some of the most “hard-to-staff” districts). Most of these districts are disproportionately located in economically challenged and underdeveloped rural communities. Many of the schools within these districts are severely resource-constrained, struggling with declining state funds and local support due to plant closures and diminishing tax bases.

Information regarding of the current rural educators is available in Figures 1 through 4. Figure 1 provides information about the five-year career plan for the sampled rural educators – including whether they intend to stay employed in their current position or geographic location. The majority intended to stay in their current roles. Figure 2 presents information regarding their student teaching experiences, specifically if it was completed in a rural setting or not. More than half of the responding participants indicated they had no rural teaching experience. For those that did, areas of training included Orangeburg, Jasper, Central, Clarendon, Walterboro, Barnwell and Starr in South Carolina, as well as Shelby, North Carolina and Jamaica. Figure 3 expands on the distance educators commuted for work. Participants noted that they traveled an average of 18.23 miles in their commute from home to work. The figure shows the percent of participants of participants

by their reported daily commute miles. Respondents also identified, in an open-ended response

format, the following top three characteristics of working at their rural school that should be advertised to recruit new teachers: smaller classroom sizes, a strong family environment at work, and the ability to make a visible impact in the lives of their students.

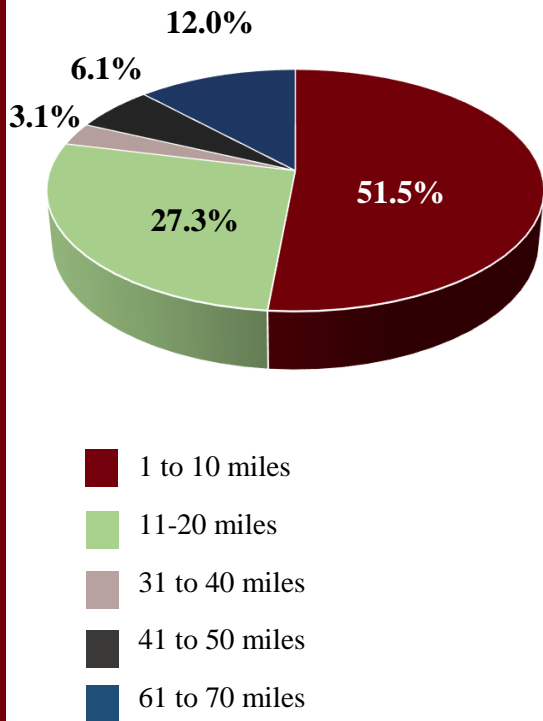


Figure 3. Distance Sample Rural Educators Commute to Work

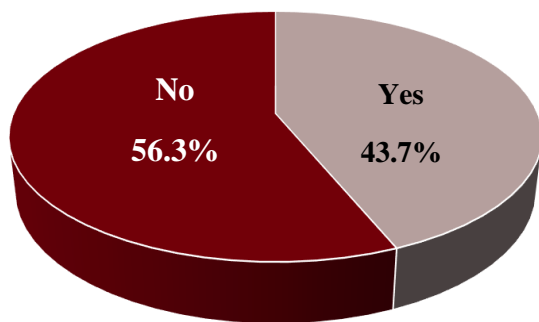


Figure 4. Percentage of Sample Rural Educators who Grew Up in the Lowcountry

Eleven teacher participants and one principal further participated in interviews to provide additional insight into their teaching experiences as well as their perspective on how to recruit and retain teachers in their rural hard-to-staff context. The following themes emerged from their interviews:

#### *Importance of Context-Specific Teacher Preparation*

Current rural teachers in the field reiterated the importance of context-specific teacher preparation programs as alluded to by teacher education majors in Tran, Hogue, and Moon's (2015) study. Many of the teachers interviewed mentioned that they did not have any experience teaching in a rural setting until they began their jobs there. As one teacher stated,

I didn't feel like I was equipped to teach in the rural areas with the different socioeconomic backgrounds of the kids. I knew I had the knowledge base, but I didn't have that practical experience of what to expect.

Many teachers did not have any knowledge of the culture or the issues associated with teaching in rural areas, and many felt the theories they learned through coursework did not prepare them for the realities and practicalities of the job. In fact, only 46% of respondents indicated that their student teaching or practicum requirement took place in a rural location.

The teachers recommended that there should be more opportunities to learn about teaching in rural schools, whether it be through specifically designed

coursework or through practical rural classroom experience. The school principal interviewee confirmed that “[i]f you do not know some of these troubles of these children, or the circumstances that they endure, then your thought process and the way that you deal with them is going to be completely different.” These experiences can help prospective teachers overcome the barrier of the negative stigma associated with many rural communities that serve to detract potential educators from working there, including what one teacher described as a perception that rural contexts are “backwards.”

### *The Rural Advantages for Teacher Attraction*

Countering the pejorative view of rural communities, all of the teachers interviewed provided what they felt were advantages of living and teaching at a rural school. Many mentioned the relaxed atmosphere and slower-paced life in the community. One teacher said this about her experience living in rural South Carolina:

Out here we have, it’s just a flair. We’re laid back to a certain extent. We are more accepting I believe, we’re open, and we’re friendly...just tell them if you want friendly people, you want hard-working people, come to the Lowcountry.

Many teachers also felt that the smaller class sizes and the sense that they could make a difference in the classroom were two of the biggest advantages of working at a rural school. As one teacher stated, “I felt like I was giving back to my community, so I wanted to make a difference and change things.” Another agreed, noting that “I feel like I’m more able to change things. I’m more a part of changing the school for the better rather than being a piece of it.” Several teachers noted how welcoming their small schools were and the strong relationships and ties teachers maintained with their students and community, even after the student has left the school. The interviewed principal recognized that administrators must “[s]ell your program, sell your town, sell your community” in order to recruit new teachers. By communication to potential teachers the positives of living and teaching in a rural district, the interviewees believed recruitment might improve.

### *The Importance of Pay*

Interviewees most frequently recommended paying teachers as a strategy for improving teacher recruitment. Many suggested increasing the salary; others recommended

incentives or bonuses. They saw providing more money or incentives as a way to motivate new teachers. One interviewee explained, “When you are young...giving them more incentives, you know, money will help them to make that drive...” However, it was clear from discussions that adequate pay mattered less to teacher retention than strong administrative support. As one teacher summarized

I’ve seen teachers come and go in probably the last three years. The turnover rate at our school this past year was 10 teachers. We lost 10 teachers. The year before that, we probably lost the same amount...there was an incentive for them to be here, a monetary incentive, and that was the reason they came here. But I do know that the teachers that stick teaching in a rural area, they need a lot of support. I’m talking about support from administrative perspective.

She stressed that administrators should back up their teachers and listen to them.

### *The Importance of Administrative Support*

Consistent with the findings from aforementioned studies (e.g., Tran & Smith, 2018a, Tran and Smith, 2018b) that highlighted the importance of administrative support for teacher recruitment, several teachers, if they did not directly state administrative support, talked about the influence a strong administrator can have on their experience and desire to stay at a school. To help new teachers build self-efficacy and confidence in teaching rural students, respondents frequently suggested that administrators should provide a mentor teacher to the new teacher. However, it is essential that the mentor teacher not be “too busy,” and can provide sufficient attention and guidance to the new teacher.

One teacher stated that the solution to addressing teacher retention was just as simple as making the teacher “feel appreciated.” Another teacher elaborated further on why ensuring teachers feel appreciated is crucial.

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Some of these teachers have been here like 20 plus years, and they weren't doing anything to acknowledge, to reward them. I mean, even just coming in and saying hey, you did a good job, thank you for doing this or thank you for doing that. It goes unnoticed, and you get tired, just like the kids. You get tired of always being put down, telling you you're not doing a good enough job.

Effective communication is critical. One teacher noted that “veteran teachers sometimes feel that they are not being heard,” and another pointed out how it was important that teachers be able to “express the way you [as a teacher] feel, or your concerns without having any retaliation.” Having an “open door” for teachers was another way that they felt they could have a voice and feel appreciated.

Beyond creating a culture of openness and appreciation, some respondents identified rural-specific challenges that might benefit from administrative support. For example, one respondent noted that “...often times a small group politically runs the school system, and they may not like you or something about you, and there are certain biases or prejudices, that have to be tolerated...” To address this, she recommends that making teachers feel more welcomed and inviting them to participate in the community. “The community,” she elaborated, “has to buy having better quality teachers, invite them to the church, invite them out to dinner...In the same time, genuinely make them feel welcomed, and stop some of the political deals that's going behind closed doors.” While the provision of administrative support was important for teacher retention, the lack of support can drive away teachers. One teacher shared that she changed schools because her principal opposed teachers' pedagogical attention on local environmental “placed-based” education and participation in master naturalist programs.

Ensuring adequate access to resources was another strategy for retention highly suggested. One teacher said it was essential because “it's all over our state that a lot of our teachers put their own money into the classroom.” Another teacher shared that she was a new teacher and could not provide adequate materials for her classroom. Some teachers mentioned having grants to help provide technology for their classrooms and provide additional resources. For those recipients, this resulted in much more positive feelings towards resources. For example, one respondent noted, “...we have excellent equipment and tools. Being a poor school, and being what's called the ‘Corridor of Shame,’ we have received grants, and I have a new Apple desktop, a new Apple Macbook, a new iPad, a new very nice permanency board, and we

have IT services things all like that together.” Grant access, however, did not seem to be uniform, and those who did not have the means to apply for and receive supplemental funding reported feeling resourced inadequately.

Finally, several respondents identified the lack of access to university campuses and the lack of graduate courses/certification program offerings at rural schools as major reasons why there is less interest in rural teaching. This sentiment reflects past research (Goff & Brueker, 2017) on rural teacher labor markets. In the end, the principal in the group noted that “...empowering your faculty and staff, and tapping into those qualities that they have, because every last one of them has something that they can contribute” was essential in helping retain them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND POLICYMAKERS

The teacher recruitment and retention issues at rural schools in South Carolina are complex. Understanding the perceptions of potential as well as current teachers is critical to addressing potential shortages in these hard-to-staff areas of the state. We conclude this report with key takeaways garnered from these studies and make recommendations based on those findings.

### *The Need for Rural Teacher Salary to Be Improved.*

Consistent with Herzberg’s motivational theory (Herzberg, Mausner, Peterson, & Capwell, 1957), both potential and current educators agree that inadequate salary offerings currently serve as a deterrent to rural education employment (i.e., they create job dissatisfaction or dissuades entry into the teaching career). Nationally, rural teachers earn an average beginning pay of \$33,200 when compared to suburban teachers at \$40,500 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017), and this is on top of the teacher pay penalty gap (i.e., 18.7%) that already exists between teachers and other professions that require a similar level of training and experience (Allegretto & Mishel, 2018). While people don’t necessarily enter the field of education to make top dollars—evident from the fact that most college student respondents stated a willingness to consider a rural teaching career and were amenable to starting salaries that are lower than their current chosen occupation—their serious *consideration* for rural teaching was contingent on whether their individual minimum salary threshold was met. They perceived low relative salaries to have a diminishing effect on the profession’s respectability. In short, they

expect and deserve a livable wage; therefore, the teacher “pay penalty” (Allegretto & Mishel, 2018) must be addressed to increase interest in teaching, especially in rural communities. The state should heed these findings in their teacher pay raise and school funding decisions, and districts should respond accordingly. That said, while adequate pay is necessary, it is an insufficient condition to sustain rural teaching employment.

### *The Need for Rural Specific Teacher Education Training and Development.*

College student respondents, including those in teacher education programs, reported hesitation in considering teaching jobs at hard-to-staff rural schools because they were concerned they would do more harm than good in the classrooms with many high-needs (i.e., high poverty, low academic achieving) students as typically found in hard-to-staff environments. Pre-service teachers’ feelings of confidence in their self-efficacy as a teacher of students who struggle academically were statistically related to their stated willingness to teach in rural hard-to-staff districts. In addition, college students across majors cited that their perceived self-efficacy as a teacher working with rural students as one of the top three most important factors attracting them to a rural school district with severe teacher staffing shortages.

Institutions of higher education have opportunities to support the efforts to improve the teacher shortage in rural areas by improving prospective teachers’ sense of self-efficacy. Adding coursework to learn about rural schools and their specific issues can help potential teachers understand the variety of issues students face. Few teacher- or principal-preparation programs include a formal or structured emphasis on preparing educators to work in different school contexts, environments, and locales. The incorporation of curriculum specifically tailored to working in rural schools would help overcome some of the shock and adverseness to employment in rural schools. Incorporating additional classroom time throughout the entire degree program can help students to see how the theories learned in the classroom can or cannot translate into practical use. However, the linkages must be made clear, as several educators interviewed noted that they failed to see the connection between theory and practice. Increasing the amount of time students spend in rural classroom settings will also give them a clear understanding of what life may be like in those areas.

Furthermore, teacher educator institution should expand partnerships with high-need rural schools to maximize teacher and administrative practicum placements in these districts following the idea that practicum and student teaching placements create pathways to full-time employment in the same environment. Barley and Brigham (2008) highlighted a distinct lack of rural-specific training for prospective teachers. In the central region of the U.S., the few

programs that have rural-specific elements in teacher preparation programs include options for obtaining multiple-subject certification, provide greater access to teacher preparation coursework for prospective rural teachers, recruit prospective teachers from rural areas, offer student teaching placements in rural schools, offer coursework focused on rural education, and focus on critical teacher shortages common in rural areas.

Teacher preparation programs should not only provide students with rural teaching experiences, however, but also provide opportunities to acclimate, learn about, engage with, and immerse in rural communities beyond the school site, given the importance of the community influence on rural teachers' lives. They should have an opportunity to learn about local resources and recognizes the advantages associated with such contexts. These programs can be developed through partnerships with rural district and school personnel. This immersion is important because rural communities are not monolithic, and perceptions of a rural environment may be disconnected from reality. Research supports this seeming disparity. Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018), for instance, examined first-year teachers' perceptions of rurality, finding that teacher education students from rural backgrounds often frame themselves as rural representatives during coursework, leading to generalized notions of rural education and communities that did not match with their experience. Additionally, expansion of teacher education transfer preparation programs at rural community colleges could be another avenue to enhance and infuse rurality into teacher education preparation by expanding the offering of curriculum and preparation of students already in rural settings.

Consequently, Blanks et al. (2013) advocate for increased cooperation between rural schools and university faculty to better place student teachers in rural schools. Students placements in internships at rural schools help attract high-quality talent to those schools; teaching interns expand rural schools' capacity to offer support to students; and student interns help enhance the instructional intensity at rural schools through co-teaching models, all while emerging student teachers in field placements within a setting in which they can be mentored and learn the rural context. Many of the interviewed rural educators noted the lack of preparation they felt coming into teaching in the rural context from their teacher preparation programs. They shared that, while some of their colleagues were not able to "survive" or stay, those that were pointed to the strength of their schools' administrative support.

### *The Need for Rural Specific Administrative Support.*

The importance of administrative support was a theme that emerged in most of the studies conducted. It is critical for teacher retention, but may also yield benefits for recruitment as news of positive working conditions spread. However, the needs expressed by study participants suggest that rural principals require targeted development in order to provide such support. In addition to effective communication and facilitating the adequate provision of teaching mentorships and resources for teachers, rural principals require context-specific development and preparation. For instance, rural principals often must help new rural teachers acclimate to their community, make connections for them to ensure that they feel a sense of belonging, and often have the social expectation of being a community leader, in addition to a school leader (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Like with rural teacher preparation, institutes of higher education can play a pivotal role in better preparing rural leaders to provide the administrative support necessary for their teachers and students to thrive. Fusarelli and Militello (2012) describe a North Carolina State University Race-to-the-Top-funded initiative that prepared leaders specifically for rural, high-poverty schools. This program focused on developing individualized leader development plans; embedding rural practicums and paid internships; teaching specific rural context and turnaround principles and training; and engaging students in rural community activities, leadership succession plan development, and transitional and early career support. These types of developments for the provision of contextualized administrative support has the potential to help school principals retain their teachers, even in what is traditionally perceived as “hard-to-staff” contexts, as teacher respondents have noted that strong administration can make a real difference for the working conditions of teachers. Strong administrative support to teachers also increases the perceived respectability of the profession, as school principals can help shield teachers from unnecessary pressure and stress.

### *The Need to Highlight Rural Advantages.*

It was clear from current rural teacher respondents that beyond the challenges, rural communities offered many advantages that district recruiters should highlight during the teacher recruitment processes. Specifically, they identified the following top three characteristics of working at their rural school that should be advertised to recruit new teachers: smaller classroom

sizes, a strong family environment at work, and the ability to make a visible impact in the lives of their students. Rural educator respondents talked about developing bonds and relationships with their students. Because of the small communities, teachers were able to watch many of their students grow up to become adults and parents themselves. This desire for community connection emerged in Tran and Smith's (2018b) utility analysis results as well, with college students that citing a strong sense of connection as the third highest ranked factor for attracting them into rural teaching.

Ultimately, K-12 school employers can also take note of the strategies elaborated by the potential and current teachers. It is only the first step to sell potential teachers on the positives of working in a rural environment, but then districts must follow through on providing support and mentorship development opportunities to keep talent in their schools.

### *The Need for Community Development and Resource Support.*

Discussions with rural educators from teacher shortage districts in South Carolina revealed the tremendous lack of resources available to their communities. Many spoke of there being “nothing to do” in their geographic context, that results in people leaving. The departures come from not only teachers but also students, who upon graduation, are often encouraged to leave their community because of the lack of job and career growth opportunities in the region. Some teachers noted that the distance to the closest University and course offerings (especially at the graduate level) available to prospective rural teachers creates barriers for employment. Efforts to build up the local rural economies can revitalize interest with not only attracting but retaining individuals in rural communities.

Many rural districts struggle financially due to a variety of reasons including low tax base for property value revenue. Because of revenue limitations, many rural schools and school districts seek additional sources of funding. While grants are available for some rural low-performing schools and have been reported to be impactful for their teachers, not all schools are taking advantage of obtaining those funds. This may be because not all rural schools are eligible or that certain rural schools do not have the capacity or knowledge to obtain grant funding. The provision of grant fund training to impoverished rural school districts can be helpful to improve classroom resource access. This training may be provided through partnerships with universities and school districts.

To elaborate, higher education institutions can serve an important role as an intermediary to bring resources and stakeholders together to further develop rural communities. Specifically, community colleges are well positioned as regional educational providers to serve as civic intermediaries that bring resources together towards common interests as the most local form of postsecondary education. Harbour and Smith (2016) describe the community college as a problem solver in the larger picture of building civic capacity and addressing community issues. In part, this required fostering a democratic environment within communities to solve daunting problems, educator recruitment and retention being one that has significant implications for youth and economic outcomes. The community college is well-positioned to serve as a civic-intermediary to not only support the academic entrance into the education profession, but also to serve as a hub that brings together other community and state resources to solve this daunting problem. Many factors influencing rural educator recruitment and retention are beyond the control of sphere of influence of a community college, but the community college, with support of community stakeholders, can bring together agencies, organizations, and stakeholders that have a collectively larger ability to move the needle on this problem (e.g., universities, local governmental agencies, school boards, state education officials, state legislatures).

### Ending Note

While this report shared valuable insight from both potential and current rural teachers, more critical inquiry and research into how to tackle rural educator employment problems is needed. Relative to other contexts, rural education research is scant and deserves much more attention. Universities should also continue to promote scholarship on research recruitment and retention practices in order to understand which are most beneficial in addressing the teacher shortage issues.

## Author Bias

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