

AN EVALUATION OF STAFF RECRUITMENT AND
RETENTION IN THE SMALLEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN
ILLINOIS: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

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Why this topic?

- Rural schools make up nearly half of the nation's school districts (McClure & Reeves, 2004) with 14% of all U.S. children attending a school district in a community of less than 2500 people (Beeson & Strange, 2000, p.1).
- Although teachers are the single most important determinant to student achievement, rural school districts struggle to recruit and retain teachers.



Statement of the Problem

- Rural school districts struggle to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers especially in high demand areas.
- If administrators can identify the factors that are associated with high rural teacher job satisfaction, then they can improve teacher recruitment efforts and increase retention, reduce the costs associated with additional professional development of new staff, and accelerate student achievement.
- To determine what strategies are most effective in recruiting teachers and retaining them in small rural school districts, reliable data must be collected and analyzed from teachers who currently teach in the smallest rural schools.



Purpose of the Study

- The purpose of this study was to identify teacher recruitment and retention factors in the smallest public school districts in Illinois.
- Research documenting the challenges that rural schools face in recruiting and retaining teachers was reviewed.
- This quantitative study used an electronic survey of teachers which included Likert-type questions measuring teacher recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction factors in the 24 smallest public school districts in Illinois.



Research Questions

1. What recruitment factors most influence teachers to accept teaching assignments in the smallest public school districts in Illinois?
2. What retention factors most influence teachers to remain teaching in the smallest school districts in Illinois?
3. What perceived strategies would rural teachers suggest to improve teacher recruitment and increase teacher retention in the smallest public school districts in Illinois?



Hypotheses

- Alternative Hypothesis - H1 : There is a statistical difference between the importance of the recruitment factors influencing teachers to accept rural teaching positions in the smallest public school districts in Illinois.
- Alternative Hypothesis - H1 : There is a statistical difference between the retention factors that have influenced teachers to remain teaching in the smallest public school districts in Illinois.



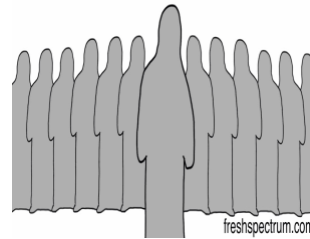
"I've narrowed it to two hypotheses:
it grew or we shrunk."

Null Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis – H_0 : There is no statistical difference between the importance of the recruitment factors in influencing teachers to accept rural teaching positions in the smallest public school districts in Illinois.

Null Hypothesis – H_0 : There is no statistical difference between the retention factors that have influenced teachers to remain teaching in the smallest public school districts in Illinois.

I am what is
The default, the status quo
I am already accepted, can only be rejected
The burden of proof is on the alternative
I am the null hypothesis



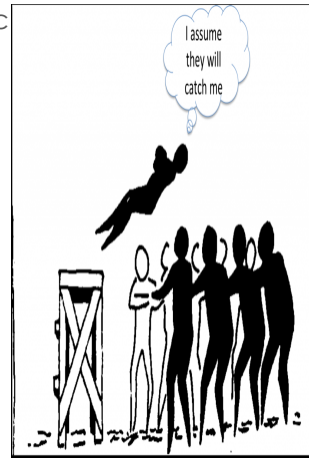
Significance of the Study

Understanding recruitment and retention factors can help other rural schools nurture their most valuable resource, their teaching staff, and reduce the negative cost of teacher attrition in lost professional development and student achievement opportunities.



Assumptions

1. Gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background of the participants did not significantly impact their responses to survey questions.
2. Participants answered honestly the electronic surveys themselves without coercion from external influences.
3. The researchers whose studies were examined in the literature review took steps to ensure the reliability and validity of their results.



Limitations and Delimitations

- A limitation factor for this study was history since it may have had an impact on the study's findings on teacher recruitment and retention. The fear of unemployment generated by the Great Recession was a potential limiting factor on how participants responded to the survey questions. Teacher competence was also not considered in this study.
- Delimitation factors included the scope of the study itself, focusing on the very smallest Illinois public school districts with enrollments of less than 100 students, the selection of only public schools, the selection of a quantitative survey instrument rather than qualitative study, and the timeframe itself.



Review of the Literature

Literature review consists of fifteen sections –

- Definition of Rural Schools
- The Prevalence of Rural Schools
- Rural School Demographics Reflect Diversity
- Achievement Gaps in Rural Schools
- Teacher Expertise Impacts Student Achievement
- The Challenge of Rural School Teacher Retention and Recruitment
- Effects of Teacher Salary and Collective Bargaining
- Rural Australian Teacher Satisfaction and a Model for Teacher Retention
- Montana Rural School Teacher Recruitment and Retention
- Role of Rural Isolation in Recruitment and Retention of Teachers
- Homegrown Initiatives
- Challenges Presented by Federal and State Mandates
- Marketing Efforts for Rural Teacher Recruitment
- Will Rural Teachers Stay or Will They Go?
- Contribution of the Study



Research Methodology

- The methodological approach selected for this study was a descriptive quantitative research design.
- The present study sought to identify the variables that contribute to teacher recruitment and retention in the 24 smallest rural schools in Illinois so that rural administrators may effectively plan initiatives to improve rural teacher recruitment and increase teacher retention.
- A quantitative design was chosen to ensure the reliability and validity of the study so that its results could be generalized.



Population and Sample

- A purposive sample of teachers from the smallest, mostly rural, public school districts in the state of Illinois was drawn from the total population of approximately 124,000 Illinois K-12 public school teachers (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012).
- To be included in the purposive sample used for this study, teachers needed to be employed in one of the 24 Illinois public school districts with less than 100 students.



A subset of the population.

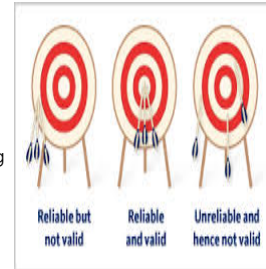
Instrumentation

- The research design included an electronic survey of a representative sample of teachers from the smallest public school districts in Illinois. The electronic survey was based on a quantitative survey developed by Dr. Marsha Davis and used in her 2002 doctoral dissertation, *An Investigation of Factors Related to Teacher Retention in Small Rural School Districts in Montana*. The electronic survey utilized SurveyMonkey as a host and consisted of questions of Likert-type items measuring factors associated with the recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction of rural teachers.
- The survey included the following categories of questions: what factors influenced the teacher's decision to accept a position in their present district; what influenced teachers to remain teaching in small rural schools; what additional steps do teachers suggest small rural schools take to recruit and retain teachers; questions regarding satisfaction with teaching; and, finally, questions pertaining to the background of the survey participants.



Reliability and Validity

- Extensive steps were taken by Dr. Davis to establish reliability and validity in her survey instrument. A panel of rural education experts was consulted regarding survey content, format, and whether they identified any potential threats to validity or reliability within the survey. The Davis (2002) survey was field tested with eight rural educators identified by county superintendents from various rural elementary I Montana school districts. They also provided feedback and suggestions regarding survey content and format which were incorporated into a final revised survey which then was utilized in the Davis (2002) study.
- Limitations to the internal validity of this study of recruitment and retention in the smallest of Illinois public school districts were most likely to stem from the threats of alternate causes, history, and maturation.
- External validity and external reliability may also be negatively impacted by the limited scope of the current study since it is focused on the 24 smallest public school districts in Illinois.



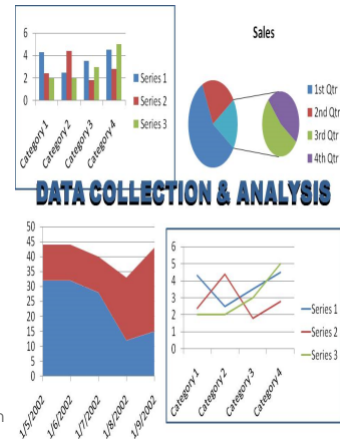
Procedures

- The study received Institutional Review Board and the survey collection period occurred from October 15 through December 15, 2014. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher attempted to contact via telephone the administrators of each of the 24 smallest Illinois public school districts providing them with a brief explanation of the study, its significance, and potential risks. Following the telephone calls, approximately 210 survey mailings were sent out via US mail to teachers in each of the 24 smallest public school districts in the state. Email invitations were also sent to potential participants.
- The cover letters provided the following information: a brief explanation of the study and its significance, the URL for the SurveyMonkey survey instrument, the promise of full anonymity for participants, and a description of the potential risks involved with participating in the study. The mailings included a letter of support from David Ardrey, Executive Director of the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools, and a paper copy of the survey.
- After two weeks, each school district's administrator was contacted again to remind them to ask teachers to voluntarily participate in the study. To maximize respondents, a second mailing was sent out approximately 30 days after the first one reminding potential subjects of the survey opportunity. A total of four email invitations were sent out on the following dates: October 14th, 2014; October 22nd, 2014; November 3rd, 2014; and November 10, 2014.



Data Collection

- Once the most influential factors were identified, strategies were then suggested for rural public school districts to improve teacher recruitment and increase teacher retention. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the influence of various factors on the decision of the participants to accept and remain teaching in rural schools with "1" meaning no influence and "5" meaning a very large influence. P
- Participants were asked to rank the most important steps they thought rural school districts could undertake to recruit teachers and then to retain them. Multiple choice close-ended questions were utilized to measure participant satisfaction with teaching in a small school district and to obtain demographic information. Open-ended questions were provided to participants so that any factors not already included in the survey instrument could be identified.
- SurveyMonkey was used to collect data from both the electronic and paper surveys. Electronic survey data was collected automatically by SurveyMonkey while data from the paper surveys was entered manually by the student researcher. Once all of the survey data had been entered, SurveyMonkey provided descriptive statistics and charts. Data from SurveyMonkey was then integrated with the statistics software program SPSS for more indepth statistical analysis.



Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize, and display the data.
- A mean score was calculated for questions one and two to provide a simple measure of central tendency. This enabled the student investigator to identify the average of the scores. Variability was measured by providing the standard deviation. Frequency distribution was determined through the use of bar graphs showing how often a response was given. Recruitment and retention factors were categorized by Boylan's spheres of influence. To measure which of the spheres were most important to teacher recruitment and retention in small, rural school districts, statistical tests (repeated measures such as ANOVA) were performed.
- Percentages for the responses given to the teacher satisfaction questions were displayed in tables.
- Descriptive statistics were used to create a profile that describes respondent demographic data including gender, age, marital status, total number years teaching, years of teaching in their present assignment, educational degree, and whether or not the respondent considered that they came from a rural, suburban, or urban background. Depending on how each demographic variable is measured, mean, median, standard deviations, and frequency were used to analyze the demographic data.

Results – Reliability and validity of survey instrument

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the survey instrument. Cronbach's alpha yields a number between 0.00 and +1.00. The closer the coefficient is to +1.00, the higher the internal reliability of the instrument.

- ✓ 12 Recruitment factors had coefficient alpha of .575
- ✓ 16 retention factors had a coefficient alpha of .721
- ✓ Added together, the 28 recruitment and retention factors had a coefficient alpha of .808



Results – Demographic Data

- Demographic data for the population sample revealed a largely homogenous group that was 85% female, 99% Caucasian, and 76% married.
- The majority of respondents (89%) were elementary or middle school teachers.
- The majority of teacher participants had a rural background growing up (69.72%), but were not native to the communities they now taught in (82.30%).
- The majority of respondents did not presently live in the districts where they taught (83.19%).



Results – Research Question One

- The recruitment factors with the highest means ratings that most influenced teachers to accept teaching assignments in rural schools were "best or only job offer" (M=2.71), "enjoy the rural lifestyle" (M=2.65), "family and/or home is close by" (M=2.61), and "small class size" (M=2.45).
- The recruitment factors with the least influence on teacher acceptance of teaching assignments were "school's recruiting program" (M=.198), "access to recreational activities" (M=.391), "opportunity to practice multigrade teaching" (M=.867), and "materials and resources available" (M=.867).
- The spheres of influence with the greatest impacts on teacher recruitment were the family/personal sphere with a mean of 1.80 and the whole school sphere with a mean of 1.76. The whole school sphere was found to have a statistically significant difference between both the community and within classroom spheres.



Results – Research Question Two

- The retention factors with the highest means averages that most influenced teachers to remain teaching in rural schools were "relationships with students" (M=3.26), "safe environment" (M=2.92), "small class size" (M=2.71), and "support from administrator" (M=2.70).
- The spheres of influence that had the greatest impact on teacher recruitment were the community sphere with a mean average of 2.7 and the within classroom sphere with a mean average of 2.4.
- The teacher retention spheres of influence with the greatest impact on teachers' decisions to remain teaching in their present school districts (within classroom and community) were both different than the recruitment spheres of influence with the greatest impact on teacher's decisions to accept rural teaching assignments (family/personal and whole school).



Results – Research Question Three

- Four of the 15 effective strategies for teacher recruitment and retention were chosen by over 50% of the respondents: "provide competitive insurance packages" (59.05%), "salaries competitive with other states" (58.10%), "more flexibility with scheduling, including flexible personal days" (55.24%), and "state funded \$1000 salary increase for all teachers working in small, rural public school districts" (52.38%).
- The four strategies identified as least effective received fewer than 12% of responses: "help with finding housing or help with low interest loans to buy houses" (3.81%), "Grow Your Own teacher programs to help local people receive teacher certification" (4.76%), "stipends for teachers who earn National Board Certification" (9.52%), and "student teacher placement" (11.43%).



Results – Teacher Satisfaction Questions

- The Illinois teacher respondents from the state's 24 smallest school districts indicated they planned to remain teaching (84%) at higher percentage levels than the national average (74%) and the prior Davis (2002) study (73%).
- The Illinois teacher respondents indicated they would choose teaching as a career all over again at the same percentage levels as the national average (67%) and slightly less than the Davis (2002) study (70%).
- Illinois teachers expressed that doing their best in their teaching assignments might be a waste of time at a slightly higher level (18%) than the national statistics (17%) and the Davis (2002) study (16%).



Happiness
is a choice.

Conclusions - Demographics

- There was more gender diversity in the present Illinois study than in the Davis (2002) Montana study – ten percentage points higher.
- The percentage of teachers who held advanced degrees in the 24 smallest Illinois school districts (48%) was within seven percentage points of the Illinois state average (55%) and considerably higher than the Davis (2002) Montana study (10%).
- The majority of teachers employed in the smallest school districts of Illinois were from rural areas themselves (70%) but only a few grew up in the communities where they now taught (18%).
- The majority of teacher respondents indicated they did not currently reside in their school district communities (83%) and would not choose to do so if given the opportunity to reside there (60%).



Conclusions – Research Question One

- As with the Davis (2002) Montana study a decade ago, the sphere of influence with the greatest impact on teacher recruitment was the family/personal sphere. The second most influential sphere was the whole school sphere.
- An ANOVA test found a statistically significant difference among the four spheres enabling the null hypothesis to be rejected for Question One since there was a statistically significant difference between the importance of the recruitment factors.



Conclusions – Research Question Two

- For teacher retention, the most influential spheres were community and within classroom.
- The ANOVA test conducted found an even larger statistically significant difference between the spheres. This enabled the null hypothesis for Question Two (there was a difference between the retention factors influencing teacher decisions to remain teaching in the 24 smallest Illinois school districts) to be rejected.
- The findings of the present study suggest the factors influencing whether a teacher decides to remain teaching in a rural school are not the same factors that attracted them to teach in the rural school. **Teachers primarily accept rural teaching assignments for family/personal reasons, but decide to remain teaching in rural schools because of community factors.**



Conclusions – Research Question Three

- All of the strategies most identified by rural teachers as being effective for teacher recruitment and retention had significant financial implications for districts with the exception of "more flexibility with scheduling, including personal days."
- Rural school districts have been hit particularly hard by the school funding crisis in Illinois and may not be able to implement the more costly strategies identified by teachers as being most effective for teacher retention.
- Therefore, even the less effective strategies such as "hiring teachers who live locally," "mentoring and support programs for new teachers," "marketing of whatever the district has to offer," and "student teacher placement" may need to be considered by rural educational leaders.



Conclusions – Teacher Satisfaction Questions

- The findings from the satisfaction questions suggest –
 - 1) the rural Illinois teachers in the study were happy with their assignments
 - 2) the high levels of teacher turnover that rural schools experience are not a result of disillusionment with the profession.



Recommendations for Educational Practitioners

- ✓ **Recommendation One:** Whenever possible, rural educational leaders need to diversify their teaching staffs.
- ✓ **Recommendation Two:** Rural educational leaders should place particular weight on whether teacher applicants have a rural background, however, whether or not a teacher can be considered "home grown" is not especially important.
- ✓ **Recommendation Three:** Rural educational leaders need to recognize the spheres of influence that determine whether a teacher will accept a rural teaching assignment are not the same influence spheres that determine whether a teacher will remain in their rural teaching assignment.
- ✓ **Recommendation Four:** Since most rural teachers accept rural teaching assignments because it is their only job offer, or because the rural lifestyle appeals to them, rural communities need to make every effort to include teacher transplants into the social fabric of the community lessening the isolation many rural teachers experience.



Recommendations for Educational Practitioners

- **Recommendation Five:** Rural community leaders need to recognize that the community itself plays a key role in whether a teacher remains in their rural teaching assignment.
- **Recommendation Six:** Since the survey results showed the rural teachers who participated in this study did not consider their district's marketing efforts to be effective, rural educational leaders will want to implement best practices for recruitment marketing and revamp their programs.
- **Recommendation Seven:** The importance of homegrown teachers and housing programs for rural schools may be overstated by rural research.
- **Recommendation Eight:** Rural educational leaders should conduct exit interviews whenever possible with their teachers to better understand why they are leaving. Exit interviews will provide rural educational leaders with the additional information they need to understand the factors leading to higher than average teacher turnover and the opportunity to improve teacher retention.



Recommendations for Further Educational Research

- ✓ **Recommendation One:** The present study should be replicated to determine if its findings can be generalized to other states as well.
- ✓ **Recommendation Two:** The Davis (2002) survey instrument could be improved upon.
- ✓ **Recommendation Three:** The strong participation rate for the paper mailing calls into question the popularity of electronic survey instruments. More research should be conducted on whether paper surveys garner a stronger response than electronic surveys and with which populations.



