

## The Satisfaction of Alaska's Isolated Rural Teachers With Their Work Life<sup>1</sup>

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This study examines the sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction among 304 teachers randomly selected from small isolated schools in rural Alaska. These teachers are highly satisfied about their relationship with students and their pay benefits. Large numbers of teachers are dissatisfied, however, with community amenities, their students' academic progress, and especially, school district management. Most of these teachers teach in Indian and Eskimo villages; yet they feel that interorganizational relationships with the district office cause them more stress than cross-cultural relationships with the students and community.

In many isolated rural schools, high teacher turnover erodes the quality of education rural students receive. Hartrick, Hills, and Wallin [3] found that six out of ten teachers employed in rural British Columbia were not teaching in the same district five years later. A recent study [5] of teachers in rural Alaska found that a majority have taught at their present schools less than two years.

Few researchers have asked what causes job dissatisfaction among teachers in isolated rural schools. The few studies that have been conducted yield inconsistent findings. This inconsistency occurs, in part, because different studies ask about different aspects of teaching and, in part, because rural communities differ significantly from each other.

Rottier [7], for example, in his study of rural teachers at small schools found that student discipline in rural Minnesota is a major source of teacher dissatisfaction. Rural teachers in the state of New York also identified discipline as the major source of work stress; administrative incompetence was cited as the next most serious problem [6]. Teachers in small North Dakota schools, in contrast, were most dissatisfied with school facilities and services, teacher status, and teacher salary [2]. Rural teachers in British Columbia expressed dissatisfaction with many aspects of their work lives—insufficient opportunity for self-improvement, inadequate support services, and lack of involvement in school district decision-making [4].

### THE RURAL ALASKA CONTEXT

Since the sources of teacher dissatisfaction depend on the specific conditions of the schools in which they teach, research on rural teachers' satisfaction with their work life should describe with some care the particular community and school context.

Most teachers in rural Alaska work in isolated Eskimo or Indian villages of a few hundred residents. While a handful of these communities are on the highway system, most are accessible only by light aircraft. These small communities offer few of the amenities teachers can take for granted elsewhere. While some school districts or communities provide modern teacher housing, in others teachers must rent cabins or plywood shacks. Most rural teachers live without local supermarkets, variety stores, professional medical and dental services, and repair shops.

On the other hand, rural Alaska teachers are the highest paid teachers in the United States. In 1985, their average yearly salary approached \$40,000 and reached in some districts a maximum of almost \$55,000 [1]. Alaska's rural teachers typically have classes of fewer than ten students and work in state-of-the-art schools equipped with computers, satellite television, and a plethora of materials and equipment.

Administratively, rural schools are part of "Rural Educational Attendance Areas," typically very large geographic areas that encompass between a few and as many as 27 rural communities. The schools may have local advisory school boards, but legal responsibility for educational decision-making rests with the regional school boards elected to represent the communities in the district. The superintendent and district support staff work in the district center which is usually located in one of the larger communities in the district.

### METHODOLOGY

A survey on rural school conditions was mailed to one randomly selected teacher in each rural Alaska school. For the purpose of this study, schools in Alaska communities with fewer than 7000 residents were defined as "rural." The upper limit of 7000 residents permitted us

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to examine variation in rural teacher satisfaction related to such conditions as community size and ethnicity.

Our final sample consisted of 304 rural Alaska teachers. Since one teacher from each rural school was sampled (not rural teachers as a population), the sample includes large numbers of teachers from small isolated schools. Of the teachers, 55 percent taught in schools with 80 percent or more Eskimo and Indian students; 20 percent taught in schools with 80 percent or more Caucasian students; the remaining 25 percent taught in schools with mixed student populations.

Due to dogged follow-up efforts and the incentive of a free publication for the respondent's school library, we enjoyed an exceptionally high response rate; 96 percent of our sample returned the survey or answered survey questions in a follow-up telephone interview.

The survey asked teachers about their level of satisfaction with various school and community conditions, such as students' academic progress, relationships with the community and with the district office, and the availability of local services. We asked teachers about the particular schools and community conditions we had discovered in previous research to be problem areas. The initial survey was pre-tested three times with different groups of rural teachers; items were added, deleted, and changed to reflect their concerns.

After preliminary analyses, we collapsed "very satisfied" and "mostly satisfied" responses into the "satisfied" category. Similarly, we collapsed "dissatisfied" and "somewhat satisfied" responses into the "not satisfied" category. Satisfaction was analyzed by school ethnicity, school size, type of school governance, length of teacher experience, and other variables. We report here differences in satisfaction by school ethnicity since most significant differences occurred between teachers in Native majority schools and those in Caucasian majority schools.

## FINDINGS

Rural Alaska teachers express an exceptionally high level of satisfaction at the quality of their relationships with students, both in Native majority and in Caucasian majority schools (Table 1). Teachers in these isolated schools find most rewarding the close personal relationships they developed with their students. In these small and personal rural schools, teachers did not single out student discipline as a problem area. Many rural Alaska teachers emphasize in interviews how delighted they are with the low level of discipline problems in these small rural schools compared to large urban schools.

Rural teachers also express great satisfaction with their pay and benefits. Teachers are well aware that they receive much higher pay than they would receive outside Alaska. Many teachers expect to work for a few years, save much of their salaries, and use the savings to finance a business or buy a house and land elsewhere.

As we expected, teachers express the greatest amount of dissatisfaction at the rigors of living in an isolated arctic community. They are concerned about the availability

TABLE 1

### Satisfaction of Rural Alaska Teachers and Their Work Life

School and Community Condition	Percent Satisfied (n = 304)
1. Relationships with students	93
2. Pay and benefits	89
3. Principal's supervisor	81
4. School/community relationships	74
5. Student discipline	67
6. Cost of housing	66
7. Quality of housing	64*
8. Opportunities for professional growth	59
9. Local school board action	59
10. Availability/quality of food	58
11. Students' motivation	55
12. Students' academic progress	54*
13. Support from district office	54*
14. District superintendents' management	52
15. District school boards action	52
16. Availability of goods and services	46*
17. Availability of medical care	37
	100

\*Significantly lower satisfaction rates found in these areas where schools had 80% or more Native students.

of medical care for themselves and their families and the absence of the services taken for granted in urban areas. Medical care is an especially serious problem. In an emergency, only a local health aide is typically available. Due to weather, small planes can not always land to evacuate patients.

Housing issues are major topics on teacher union agendas. Yet teacher housing is a source of dissatisfaction for only about a third of the teachers. In most communities, teachers have been able to find housing at satisfactory cost and quality.

In addition to these concerns with community conditions, teachers express frustration with two dimensions of their work life. First, almost half are not satisfied with the academic progress their students are making, especially the progress of students in Native majority communities. The marginal comments in the surveys expressed the frustration of teaching in situations where, in the teacher's view, parents did not sufficiently support education and where education did not lead to productive jobs in the community.

A second area of dissatisfaction is the teachers' relationships with the distant district office. Teachers wrote in the margins of their survey that the district office "too frequently forgot the village school," that the schools near the district center receive an "unfair share" of equipment, and that "many of the problems that face rural schools are self-inflicted" by administrators "who have never worked in rural Alaska" and "make decisions that do not fit village life or needs."

Teachers' dissatisfaction with the district office derives from many sources. First, teachers' complaints about ad-

ministrative practices may well be justified. Abuses, oversights, and inequities do occur. Second, teachers may not appreciate the pressures district administrators are under nor the political milieu in which the district staff operates. Third, teachers' discontent with the administration stems from a dynamic we have often observed in Alaska's rural schools. Teachers tend to form an alliance with the local community, come to identify with local concerns, and see themselves as advocates for community interests and needs. The management obligations imposed on the teachers by the distant district office conflict, at times, with the teachers' sense of obligation to the local community. The district office typically wants forms filled out and some uniformity of policy and practice across the schools in the district. The district office presses for gains on standardized tests—its benchmark of high quality education. Teachers prefer to shape an education that reflects local priorities and view test scores as an inappropriate measure of their success—especially when scores remain low despite their determined efforts.

Some of these tensions may be unavoidable, arising from the classic conflict between an administrative "center" and the "periphery." District administrators who are aware of these tensions, however, can relieve them. Some rural Alaska school districts, for example, encourage teachers to shape an education that fits community priorities even if the lack of standardization is a bureaucratic inconvenience for the district office. Some districts go so far as to give the local school considerable budgetary latitude. While centralized ordering may be more efficient, for example, decentralized decision-making may be educationally more effective. Allowing teachers to order their own supplies, enabling local advisory boards and teachers to hire local people for non-certified personnel, and putting teachers and the community in charge of their own programs may make administration messier and more time-consuming but, at the same time, may increase teacher satisfaction and effectiveness.

### CONCLUSION

We expected Alaska's rural teachers to express satisfaction with their pay and benefits and to express discontent with the hardships of living in isolated Native villages without many amenities. These results were not surprising.

Since our own university program to prepare rural teachers places so much emphasis on the difficulties of developing good cross-cultural relationships, we were surprised that so few rural teachers identify relationships with students or with the community as a source of serious stress.

Similarly, the number of teachers who express dissatisfaction with the distant district office was unexpected. Many rural superintendents who read our initial research support were disturbed at these findings. Several found the results so difficult to believe that they queried their teachers to check them.

Since we found a similar pattern of dissatisfaction with

the central office in virtually all districts, we do not think the problem can be attributed simply to a "good" or "poor" district office. Administrators and teachers may find the problem much easier to resolve if they recognize that much of the tension is structural and quite probably healthy—an indicator of local professionals' responsiveness to community priorities.

Administrators who are aware of these issues can do much to ease the difficulties of teachers caught between many masters. University programs for teachers who plan to work in rural, cross-cultural situations also need to prepare their students for interorganizational problems as well as for the potential problems arising from cross-cultural conflicts over values and behaviors.

Coursework designed to prepare prospective teachers for small rural schools should deal directly with such issues as (1) the strains that are typical between isolated rural schools and distant administrative management, (2) the causes of these strains, (3) administrators' and teachers' distinct values and interests, and (4) ways of managing these problems or resolving them. Prospective teachers need more than abstract knowledge of these problems. They also need analytic skills, which enable them to identify underlying issues and conflicting interests, and a repertoire of potentially applicable strategies. These are skills best learned through case study methods of instruction, methods widely used in business schools, law schools, and medical schools but rarely used in schools of education.

To provide case study curriculum material of this type, we are planning to write cases which highlight common political conflicts in Alaska's small rural schools. Using the format of Harvard Business School Cases, we are presenting surface issues and underlying concerns from the perspective of various actors in the situation. We plan to show students how to analyze these types of situations, how to identify alternative courses of action, and how to develop appropriate political as well as educational strategies.

Most educational coursework focuses on classroom and curriculum issues. Yet, political issues—so intense and so personal in small schools and communities—sap rural teachers' energies and undermine their commitment to teaching. Prospective teachers need to be prepared for these political issues, understand their inevitability, and learn how to deal with them skillfully.

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