

Factors, Issues, and Problems in the Recruitment and Retention of Teachers for Rural Schools

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I report the findings of a survey of 558 teachers in rural schools and districts throughout British Columbia, Canada. The study sought demographic data; background information about influences on subjects' decisions to enter, to remain in, or to leave their districts; and data regarding their participation in a government loan forgiveness program.

The primary aim of the research was to develop a profile of the rural school teacher and his/her career decision patterns, in order to extend and strengthen both the current literature and school districts' recruitment and retention efforts. The data were gathered by means of a survey questionnaire, tabulated, and analyzed for significant differences among various demographic groups. Sher's (1983) categories—characteristics, conditions, and compensation—provided the framework for the discussion of the findings.

The study yielded a comprehensive demographic profile of rural school teachers. Further, the data indicated that the job itself, lifestyle, school district recruiters, the financial dimension, social and recreational opportunities, and partner's job were important factors in at least one of teachers' three sets of major career decisions.

Recruitment and retention of capable teachers is perennially both an issue and a problem for many rural communities. Turnover is often high, and the availability of effective teachers is sometimes correspondingly low, although many of our rural schools are staffed by capable, committed personnel. What has been missing from the literature are studies that add substantially to our knowledge of these people: what they need during their pre-service preparation, why they go to work in small communities, what keeps them there, and why they leave.

Sher's 1977 volume, *Education in rural America: A reassessment of conventional wisdom*, engendered an awareness in academic circles of the different training needs of teachers in rural areas as compared to their urban counterparts. However, 10 years later, Sher and Rosenfeld (1987) found that there was still little definitive data on rural teachers and their role in school and community, despite general acceptance of the idea that teachers are the key to educational excellence in any community or cultural context. As Matthes and Carlson (1987) observed, "the most significant issue facing rural schools, after garnering sufficient financial resources, is the recruitment and retention of teachers" (p. 37).

Part of the problem may be that with few exceptions, "research on the particular problems and issues in rural education is still relatively obscure, lacking in focus, and comparatively unsophisticated" (DeYoung, 1987, p. 36). Stephens (1985) made a similar assessment: "There is not at present a body of research providing a comprehensive and inclusive view of rural education that even begins to approach that on education in an urban setting (p. 167).

Some have argued that this urban bias is here to stay, pointing to the fact that funding agencies rarely target particular issues in rural education (Darnell & Simpson, 1981; Nash, 1980; Sher, 1981). However, authors such as Barker (1986) and Jess (1985) assert that the benefits of small schools, once understood and appreciated, can provide models of excellence. Obviously, this more optimistic prospect cannot develop without a better understanding of what it takes to recruit, retain, and develop excellent teachers. The essential first step toward this goal may lie in better empirical research that will aid both researchers and policy makers to gain working notions of the nature of rural education (DeYoung, 1987).

A major stumbling block encountered early in the pursuit of this goal is the great diversity of

rural schools and districts. In addition to geographic, socioeconomic, and population differences (Helge, 1985), school quality, leadership, and community support vary greatly among districts (DeYoung, 1987). Both the research and the educational community may have been guilty of overgeneralizing from specific rural situations in ways that have been less than helpful in the effort to address issues of recruitment and retention. Wood and Kleine (1988), for example, complain that the

existing research studies do not provide a detailed description of settings and populations studied. Rural schools and communities differ markedly from one another and careful description is particularly necessary to help practitioners and fellow researchers determine the extent to which the results of the study are appropriate for their districts, their schools, and their faculty. (p. 5)

This heterogeneity makes it difficult to sort out the various factors that may bring teachers to rural districts and motivate them to stay.

One potentially useful framework for accomplishing this analytical task was provided by Sher (1983), who argued that attracting and keeping competent teachers is largely a function of the "three Cs": conditions, characteristics, and compensation. Conditions include environmental surroundings, including cultural, housing, and recreational facilities. Characteristics refers to the quality of personnel produced by pre-service programs, and whether they are oriented toward rural teaching through either background or training. Compensation includes not only a reasonable salary but also incentives for choosing a rural career and rewards for excellence in teaching. In the present study, this framework guided the analysis of a survey that examined factors, issues, and problems in the recruitment and retention of teachers in British Columbia's rural schools.

The Research Context

Conditions in British Columbia make it in many respects a rural province. Within its boundaries—an area of 366,255 square miles—the vegetation, climate, and topography are so varied that geographers consider the region to have 11 distinct physiographic divisions, where climate and other conditions (the first "c") vary substantially from one division to another:

At the same hour there can be fog at Prince Rupert, snow at Fort Nelson, rain at Vancouver, dry heat at Williams Lake in the Cariboo Country and balmy sunshine in Victoria. On a day in March it can be 49 above at Nanaimo and 29 below at Fort St. John . . . Along the mainland coast, depending on the location, the annual rainfall is 40 to 170 inches, while the Okanagan, a four hour drive away, gets only 10 to 20 inches. (McDonald, 1966, p. 6.)

This vast region is populated by fewer than three million people, most of whom cluster in the southeast corner of the province and in a few locations in the central interior. The remainder are scattered throughout the province in small communities that depend for their existence on agriculture, mining, fishing, oil exploration, or the forest industry. Thirty-two of the province's 75 school districts enroll fewer than 3,000 students apiece, and 12 of them fewer than 1,100 each. Within these districts, and other larger ones, there are numerous small communities, some with very small schools. For example, in one geographically large school district in the central interior, there are 24 rural schools, each with a staff of fewer than ten teachers. The ruralness of these schools, together with the extremes of climate and geography, provides excellent opportunities to assess the influence of environmental factors—Sher's (1983) "conditions"—on teacher recruitment and retention.

With respect to characteristics (the second "c"), there is not a great deal of information available, particularly on the Canadian scene, about the experiences and perspectives of teachers in rural schools. Reliable knowledge about personal background and the professional careers of these teachers, and their views on working in small communities, are essential data for rural schools in their efforts to gain educational equality for their students. The present study sought to determine the reasons why the respondents chose to teach (or discontinue teaching) in rural schools, particularly in view of the fact that most would have received no particular preparation for teaching in rural or remote areas (Alexander & Bandy, 1992). British Columbia only recently has established rural on-site pre-service programs (Storey & Nixon, 1992).

One of the goals of the present study was to explore the influence of rural factors on the professional lives and decisions of the respondents. As the recent British Columbia Royal Commission

on Education has noted, "frequent arrivals and departures of teachers in small rural communities promote a climate of instability and do little to enhance the involvement of school professionals in the general life of the community" (British Columbia Royal Commission on Education, 1988, p. 196). Clearly, in recruiting quality teachers, school districts must be able to assess the importance of rural experiential factors, or the lack thereof, in the professional backgrounds of candidates for teaching positions.

In regard to the third "c," a specific compensation program was examined in this study. Teachers who were enrolled in the Ministry's Forgivable Loan Program (FLP) were asked about the extent to which this program had influenced their decision to accept a position in a rural district and motivated them to continue working in that environment. The FLP is a provincial government policy initiative through which teachers can have their student loans forgiven, to a maximum of \$12,000 and at the rate of 10% per year, by teaching in one of 29 districts designated as rural or remote.

The FLP was the only financial variable examined in the present study. School districts in British Columbia are funded provincially according to a finance formula that ensures relative parity for all school districts. Although school districts can and do negotiate or provide specific locally relevant financial benefits, there are no financial inequities that would result in districts being identified as "rich" or "poor."

I also examined, by means of personal interviews, the experience of one rural school district that had gained a reputation for developing highly innovative strategies for addressing recruitment and retention issues.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the present study was to develop a profile of rural school teachers in British Columbia and their career decision patterns in order to extend and strengthen both the current literature and school districts' recruitment and retention efforts. The extant literature on this topic—regarding this particular setting—is relatively sparse, a fact which contributed to the decision to use a survey approach in an effort to gain useful baseline data. The research was guided by eight key questions that focused mainly on the reported views of rural teachers about their work and the factors that had influenced their decisions

to teach in the district, to stay there, and to leave. Specifically:

1. What is the demographic profile of teachers who are working in the rural/remote school districts of British Columbia?
2. What factors do teachers identify as having influenced in the decision to accept an offer of employment from a rural/remote district?
3. What do rural teachers who intend to continue working in their districts beyond the next year or two cite as the factors influencing their decision to remain?
4. What factors are identified by teachers who plan to leave the rural area as having influenced that decision?
5. To what extent was the Forgivable Loan Program a factor in teachers' decisions to accept an offer of employment from a rural/remote school district and to remain in that or another rural/remote district for a period of several years?
6. Are there examples of school districts that have succeeded in reversing an earlier pattern of difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers?
7. What strategies are being used or might be considered to aid in the recruitment and retention effort?
8. What are the policy and resource allocation implications of strategies intended to improve rural teacher recruitment and retention?

Method

Subjects

The sample for this study was drawn from two groups of teachers. The first group consisted of teachers currently employed in 26 of the 29 districts classified as rural/remote. For the most part, the sample was drawn from schools having two to nine teachers. In 14% of the sample districts, it was not possible to draw a useful sample using this criterion alone. In these districts, very few schools met this criterion, but there were nonetheless communities that were relatively remote within the district itself. In these cases, we drew the sample from larger schools in the dispersed communities. The sample selected according to these two procedures totalled 688 teachers.

The second group consisted of teachers who were enrolled in the Ministry of Education's Forgivable Loan Program (FLP) at the time of the study. This group was included at the request of the Ministry, which had sponsored the research

project and wanted to know whether the FLP offered an incentive for teachers to work in rural/remote school districts. There were approximately 450 teachers in this second group, some of whom were also in the first group. (Teachers were instructed that if they received two copies of the survey questionnaire, they should complete only one copy.)

The prospective sample for the study, offset by the unknown number of Loan Program participants who received two copies of the questionnaire, was 1,139. Of this number, 558 (49%) returned a completed questionnaire.

Design

A 22-item, 4-page survey questionnaire (available from the author on request) was designed with four sections: school and personal data, work experience, Forgivable Loan Program, and the next few years. These categories reflected the categories developed by Sher (1983), as outlined above. The instrument was designed to encourage a logical sequence of thinking about one's career: basic demographic data, factors influencing the decision to move to the district (including the FLP), and factors influencing the decision to remain in or leave the district.

A further strategy was employed to broaden the practical value of this investigation. Interviews were held with two senior officials in a rural school district that had experienced considerable success in recruiting and retaining teachers. That effort was aided by some creative strategies the district had developed, some of which are discussed below.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire yielded both numerical and written data. The numerical data were tabulated, cross-tabulated, and, where appropriate, tested for statistical significance. The written data, which in most cases was an elaboration of a numerical response, were entered in a database and sorted by item for reporting purposes. This analysis, which in a few cases included a page or more of "other comments," was particularly helpful in clarifying the possible meaning of particular numerical returns.

The return rate of approximately 50% was considered good, especially because the sampling and distribution procedures precluded the possi-

bility of follow-up contact to check on missing returns. Several respondents expressed appreciation for having been included in the study, commented on its potential value, and expressed encouragement to the researcher and a desire to receive information about the results.

Discussion of the Findings

The questionnaire developed for the present study focused on the search for factors considered by rural teachers to have been important as they considered their decisions to accept the offered teaching position, to remain in the rural school district for the next few years, or to leave the district and/or teaching soon. The findings are discussed in this section according to Sher's (1983) categories, following an overview of some demographic characteristics of the study group.

Characteristics

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by age, gender, and education. Over half of the sample were female. The respondents were broadly distributed as to age and, among the 480 people who responded to this item, the median age group was 30 to 39. On average, these teachers were in the first third of their careers: The mean experience was 9.0 years. About half (47.3%) of the respondents indicated that they worked in schools with staffs of 10 or fewer teachers. The schools identified by other respondents were in many cases considerably larger than would usually be considered typical of rural schools. These schools were located in areas considered rural because of their remoteness from the district's main center(s).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had worked fulltime for more than two consecutive years in a field other than education. Those who responded affirmatively were asked whether they had done so before beginning to teach, and whether they had done so between years of teaching. Thirty-one respondents indicated that they had done so during both periods. For purposes of this analysis, the two time periods were combined. There was a statistically significant difference between men and women for this variable ($\alpha = .05$). Fewer than one-third (30.5%) of female subjects reported having worked fulltime for more than two consecutive years in a field other than teaching, compared with roughly half (49%) of male respondents. Twenty-eight of the

Table 1
Reported distribution of age, gender, and education of respondents

Factor	N	%
Gender		
Female	334	61.4
Male	210	38.6
Total	544	
Age group		
Under 30	150	31.2
30-39	163	34.1
40-49	117	24.3
50+	50	10.4
Total	480	
Education		
Bachelor's degree	410	74.0
Master's or part	82	14.8
Certificate only	62	11.2
Total	558	

Note: N is less than 558 for gender and age because of nonresponses.

198 teachers who specified type of employment indicated a job often associated with rural communities: farmer, tree-planter, guide, park warden, and so forth.

Among the 549 respondents who responded to a question that asked whether they considered themselves to have a rural background, 281, or 51.2%, responded affirmatively. Demographic estimates of population size were provided in these comments by 75 respondents. Two thirds of these subjects (53) reported having lived in rural areas with a population of 5000 or less; 16 reported 10,000 or more. The six respondents who gave population estimates of 20,000 or more qualified their responses by indicating that they had lived on the outskirts of a large center, in a bedroom community of a metropolitan area, or in a resource-based town.

Another 110 respondents who reported a rural background provided a non-quantifiable estimate of population density using descriptions such as "small town," "small community" or "low population"; "farming community"; "isolated home"; or "away from the Lower Mainland." Other examples included: "small population—room to breathe"; "grew up in SMALL town"; "small town/village, remote, some distance from any major center of population."

Fifteen additional responses provided an indication of population density by giving quantitative estimates of the degree of isolation: "small northern country town surrounded by farms and forest—closest city 800 miles away"; "grew up in areas 10-20 miles from city"; "grew up 5 miles out of small interior town; rode a school bus to and fro for 12 years"; "neighbors at least 10 acres away"; and "travelled 18 miles by bus to high school—had no close neighbors."

Thus, 200 respondents defined their rural background in demographic terms, without particular reference to social or cultural distinctions. Three elements ran through many of the demographic definitions: size, proximity, and access. However, many respondents equated rural isolation with farming, blurring the distinction between demographic and occupational rurality.

One hundred responses contained an occupational reference to "rural backgrounds." Eighty-six of these specified farming, six ranching, four mining, two logging, and two resource-dependency. That is, these respondents felt that occupational criteria either defined or helped to define rurality. For example: "raised and educated in small town, farm background"; "living in communities such as mining camps"; and "living in small

towns with agricultural or silvicultural bases," were strong indicators of a rural background.

Finally, sociocultural distinctions characterized the definitions of "rural background" offered by 27 respondents: "play and social environment was [sic] to a big extent outdoor oriented"; "small, slightly isolated, with limited facilities, slow pace, close knit"; "small town living with small town values"; "caring and knowing other members of community, support groups"; "not influenced by culture, opportunities, education and recreation that city kids were—more sheltered from crime and drug abuse."

Elements of both a demographic and a socio-cultural perspective were suggested by 22 respondents, who defined some aspects of schooling as a major ingredient of their rural background: "went to small schools with community aspect that was strong, even though most of schooling in urban setting"; and "travelled 18 miles by bus to high school, had no close neighbors."

Twenty-seven respondents used multi-dimensional criteria to distinguish their rural background, such as: "small town (<15,000), cooperative community, everybody knows everybody"; "lived on farm in remote community, access by train or float plane, 2 room school, grades 2-8"; and "come from small town—2000, nearest town was 200 km, and didn't worry about locking car or house and knew everyone."

Just over half of the rural teachers who responded to the rural-background question reported having come from a wide variety of self-perceived rural backgrounds, in terms of such factors as population density, family history, and childhood socialization. This finding lends credence to the idea that teachers with a rural background constitute a promising source of candidates for positions in such districts. Officials in the rural school district that participated in the study reported that this target population was a major focus of their recruiting program, largely because they understood the realities of rural life and were likely to stay for a reasonable period of time.

Conditions

The job and the place. The first face-to-face contact between a rural teaching candidate and the school district is usually the recruiter or interviewer. In response to an item that identified the district's recruiting program as a possible factor in the decision to accept an offer of a teaching

position, a considerable number of respondents indicated that they had been strongly and positively impressed by these people: "superintendent made quite an effort to contact me"; "excellent person conducted interview: excellent calibre, suggesting rest of staff also good"; "they recruited early and sold their benefits, let people know they wanted them"; "appeared interested and enthusiastic while recruiting"; "they were full of fun and friendly"; and "the recruiter had a vision and was able to share it with me." These comments were reproduced here in some detail because it seemed clear that, for some teachers, the district representative was a major factor in the recruiting effort. Given the difficulties faced by some rural school districts in staffing their schools, this finding suggests that careful attention should be paid to recruiter selection and preparation.

One of the three factors cited most frequently as a reason for accepting the district's offer of employment was: "This was my first or best offer" (Table 2). Several respondents added comments related to the urgency of simply finding a teaching position, or of moving to a more certain fulltime status: "I wanted a fulltime job, and this was first offer of such"; "As a single parent, I needed the security of regular paycheques and a reasonable system in which to work"; and "It was the first place that offered me a job, and I didn't want to risk not being offered another."

A second set of comments referred to the area itself, often in terms of its geography, climate, or rural nature: "We wanted to buy acreage, which we couldn't afford [elsewhere]"; "We like mountains, not flat land . . . we don't like coastal rain/fog/clouds"; "Beautiful scenery: mountains, lakes, rivers"; "Liked community—terrific lifestyle, clean air and water, everything close, no line-ups"; and "Unpolluted air, natural wilderness, and beautiful mountains."

Several comments reflected a concern for the quality of family life, and particularly for the perceived quality of life available for the respondents' children: "Smaller class sizes for my children"; "This is the area we want our child to grow up in"; "Keeping family together in area of work for spouse and I"; and "Wanted my son to grow up safe in a rural community and school."

Several job-related factors were reported more frequently than others as an important factor influencing the decision to enter, remain in, or leave the district (Table 2). The teaching assignment ranked first in frequency as a reason both to accept

Table 2
Stated Factors in Teachers' Decision to Accept, Remain, or Leave

Factor	Factor in decision to:					
	Accept		Remain		Leave	
	N	Rank	N	Rank	N	Rank
Teaching assignment	312	1	353	1	21	5
First or best offer	223	2				
Spouse's/companion's job	186	3	249	2	41	3
Social/recreational opportunities	184	4	246	3	68	2
Opportunity to save money	111	5	111	6		
Cost of living too high					31	4
Family or friends here	108	6	176	4		
No family or friends here					75	1
Grew up in a similar area	107	7				
Difficult to return home					5	7
Enjoy the students			174	5		
Forgivable Loan Program			109	7		
Lack of contract provisions					13	6

Note. Ranks reflect the respondents' top seven factors for accepting, remaining, and leaving a teaching position in a rural district.

the offer and to remain in the district for at least the next few years. Smaller class sizes, student motivation for learning, and the absence of negative urban social influences were the reasons given most frequently. Lack of enjoyment of the teaching assignment was important to some as a factor in the stated intent to leave the district and/or teaching soon. While communication with rural teachers is often difficult or infrequent because of such factors as geography, it is clear that teacher satisfaction with the teaching assignment should be an important and deliberately planned item for discussion in all contacts. For example, Harris and Collay (1990) found that rural schools that promote staff development opportunities are "also more likely to create the kind of learning and working communities that retain new teachers" (p. 46).

The social and recreational side of life. The availability or lack of preferred social and recreational opportunities was frequently cited as an important factor in the decision to enter, remain in, and leave a rural teaching position (Table 2). The rhetorical question posed by one respondent who

intended to remain in the district was illustrative: "Where else can one have children, golf, ski, fish, hunt, hike, and mountain bike for less than \$1,000 a year?" Some respondents who indicated that they planned to leave the district and/or teaching soon and who also reported a concern about the lack of preferred social or recreational opportunities, generally focused on sports, cultural activities, and shopping, which obviously are affected by community size and remoteness.

In some cases, the range of social and recreational opportunities available in an area understandably is limited. One respondent reported woefully: "I just broke up with the only single woman in town!" The recreational facilities usually available in larger communities, such as theatres and arenas, often are not available in rural areas. That would seem to make it all the more important that the district target a large part of its recruitment effort toward teachers with a rural background: Their rural perspective may be helpful in accepting and enjoying constraints of rural life. Such a focus was one attribute of the rural school district I visited in the course of this

study. At the very least, it seems important that if a rural district is anxious to improve teacher retention, the applicant should be made aware of the local situation during the screening process, and perhaps asked about his/her interests, in an effort to ensure a reasonable fit between the teacher and the community (Bull & Hyle, 1989).

Partner, family, and friends. Proximity to family or friends did not rank particularly high in frequency of selection as a factor in the decision to accept the offered position, although it was widely reported as an important factor in the decision to remain or to leave (Table 2). However, although this factor was important for some, that group was not particularly large. In fact, it was selected as the most important factor by only 29 respondents, compared to the 123 who identified spouse's/companion's job.

The matter of spouse's/companion's job surfaced as a major factor in career decisions at all three points: accepting, remaining, and planning to leave (Table 2). In each case, a disproportionately larger percentage of women identified this as a factor. Although women constituted 62% of the sample, 79% of those who selected this item as a factor in the decision to accept were women, as were 69% who indicated this as a factor in the decision to remain and 82% for the decision to leave. For all three decisions, there was a statistically significant difference between the proportions of male and female respondents. This factor is difficult to control as far as the school district is concerned, and constitutes a reality that must be considered in making staffing plans.

Compensation

Almost one-half of the respondents indicated that they were participating, or that they had participated, in the Forgivable Loan Program opportunity offered by the Ministry of Education. By enrolling, they could have up to \$12,000 in student loans forgiven at the rate of 10% annually, as long as they continued to teach in a rural or remote school district. Forty-two percent of these respondents indicated that the program was a factor in their decision to accept the school district's offer of employment, although none indicated that it was the most important factor.

Coupled with some other reported factors, these are important findings. There were statistically significant differences between loan participants and non-participants on some financial di-

mensions of the decision to enter, to remain, and to leave: In each case, a disproportionate number of Loan Program participants (versus nonparticipants) identified the Program as a factor. These findings suggest that for a sizeable proportion of teachers, important employment decisions are likely to be influenced by financial factors. That is an area in which school districts can strengthen their recruiting programs, both by providing information and by providing incentives.

The district that I visited during the study had recognized the financial dimension as a factor, and had mounted several initiatives to attract and retain teachers. For example, the district had secured through a local bank a commitment to grant any teacher in the district a one-time loan of up to \$15,000 for any reasonable purpose at an interest rate of prime plus 1%. The district also offered a loan to its high school graduates who entered a university teacher-education program, and agreed to forgive the loan if the graduate returned to teach in the district for three years.

In taking these and other initiatives, the district recognized that there are important incentives that can be implemented fairly easily and that carry the potential to aid retention efforts, both through direct assistance and through the positive effects that these actions have on the attitudes of teachers toward the district. This district also annually asked each teacher leaving the district to complete a questionnaire exploring his/her reasons for leaving, and sought the teacher's observations on the experience of working in the district. Over time, the data from that survey should provide useful information, and the strategy is suggested as a relatively simple way of gathering future-focused information to aid the planning process, particularly in regard to staffing.

Conclusion

In the British Columbia setting, this was an early piece of research. Little information has been available on this population, and the present study has provided useful baseline data. It has also raised interesting possibilities for further research. For example, the questionnaire asked whether the teaching assignment was an important factor in career decisions. However, respondents were not asked to provide further detail regarding that variable. Each of the areas identified by respondents as important to these deci-

sions invites closer investigation, perhaps at the school district level, to obtain more specific data that might guide planning.

The relevance of the recruiter's role, which seems to have been important to some respondents, invites further examination of this and other dimensions of the recruiting initiative. If these programs and their personnel prove to be important in attracting teachers to rural communities, it is important to gain specific knowledge.

The geographic conditions and funding provisions that create the context for education in British Columbia may mean that some of the findings of the present study have limited generalizability to the American and other contexts. Whether that is the case might be determined by replicating relevant reports of the present study.

This study has identified several clusters of factors that have emerged as important to the career decisions made or contemplated by a sample of over 550 rural teachers: rural background and preference (characteristics); the job and the place; social and recreational opportunities, and partner, family, and friends (conditions); and the financial dimension (compensation). In each case, the importance attached to these factors by the rural school teacher will determine the extent to which they are associated with the teacher's decision to accept an offer of employment, to remain in the district, or to leave the district and perhaps leave teaching.

It seems clear that teachers' choices will ultimately affect school districts' efforts to attain educational equality for their students, at least if it is accepted that teachers are an important variable in that effort. It also would appear that for the rural teacher, the matter of range of choice available in the rural community may be a crucial matter, especially when it comes to assessing lifestyle opportunities. The demographic, occupational, and sociocultural characteristics of the rural community, in turn, affect the demographic, occupational, and sociocultural dimensions of teachers' lives. The range of choices may be restricted in the rural community in regard to partner's job, the teaching assignment, social and recreational opportunities, the possibility of saving money, and the proximity of family and friends. Those realities also may be important factors in teachers' career decisions.

Not all of these variables can be affected by school or school district initiatives. However, it is important that, through the systematic collection of data by both rural school districts and research-

ers, a clear picture is developed of rural teaching and living as seen through the eyes of rural school teachers. It is also important that the research effort be accompanied by creative initiatives on the part of rural school districts to address the factors that can be affected, in ways that will encourage capable teachers to remain and to strengthen their commitment to teaching in the rural community (e.g., Bull & Hyle, 1989).

In some ways, rural schools often appear as "poor country cousins" of their urban counterparts. Yet in many respects, they are not only a legitimate but also an essential focus of inquiry. Arguably, they are often forgotten. That may in part account for the surprising number of positive, encouraging and unsolicited comments written to the researcher on many of the questionnaires returned for the study described in this paper. If we are serious about pursuing educational equality for the students who learn in rural schools, it is important that we continue the effort to develop a strong base of knowledge about the teachers who teach in those schools.

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