



**Data-Driven  
Human Capital  
Strategies**

**STRATEGY BRIEF:**

Recruiting, Hiring  
and Retaining  
Educators in  
Rural LEAs

AUGUST 2021

## Local education agency (LEA) and school leaders in rural communities can use this brief to learn more about:

- Effective practices they can use to improve recruitment, hiring and retention of educators;
- Examples from other schools that have implemented strategies to address this challenge; and
- Resources to support this work in your LEA.

*To learn more about recruitment and hiring generally, see the [Recruitment and Hiring Guide](#). To learn more about educator retention, see the [Retention Guide](#).*

## Context

While we know that teachers are the most important school-based factor affecting student achievement,<sup>1</sup> rural communities are often at a disadvantage in attracting top talent. Some rural LEAs are not able to compete with more urban areas for high quality talent, based in part on the salaries offered. Additionally, in some rural LEAs, consolidation or removal of positions has created more work for remaining staff and caused some schools to lack educators with specialized training (e.g., in special education). When rural LEAs frequently struggle to fill job openings with effective educators, the negative impacts on students can compound over multiple years. Furthermore, when LEA and school leaders devote much of their time to unsuccessful recruitment and hiring efforts, they have less time and resources to use for other pressing matters that can improve student learning.

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<sup>1</sup> McCaffrey, J. R., Lockwood, D. F., Koretz, D. M., & Hamilton, L. S. (2003). Evaluating value-added models for teacher accountability. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND\\_MG158.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG158.pdf); Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417–58. Retrieved from <https://econ.ucsb.edu/~jon/Econ230C/HanushekRivkin.pdf>; Rowan, B., Correnti, R., & Miller, R. J. (2002). What large-scale, survey research tells us about teacher effects on student achievement: Insights from the prospects study of elementary schools. *Teachers College Record*, 104(8), 1525–67; Wright, P., Horn, S., & Sanders, W. (1997). Teacher and classroom context effects on student achievement: Implications for teacher evaluation. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 11(1), 57–67.

*It can be difficult to attract and retain educators in rural communities for the following reasons:*

- They may lack access to industries or commerce that more urban communities offer (which may also be a factor for employment of teachers' family members);
- They may have higher poverty levels than surrounding communities, particularly if industries have departed, affecting the local economy; and
- There may be less access to postsecondary institutions for recruitment and training for mid-career entry to education, as well as less access to programs to pursue an advanced degree in education.

## Effective policies and practices – What LEAs and schools can do

***Make strategic and deliberate investments in recruitment, hiring and ongoing development of highly effective school leaders.***

One of the biggest draws for teachers to a particular school or district is strong principal leadership.<sup>2</sup> Characteristics of strong principal leadership include the ability to foster a positive school culture, to include teachers in decision-making, and to create professional learning communities that enable educators to learn from and with one another. LEAs can invest in training or other ongoing professional learning to bolster principals' skills in these areas.

### Reflection Questions:

- *How would your principals rate their abilities to foster positive school culture, include teachers in decision-making, and enable educators to learn from one another?*
- *Are there opportunities for school leaders to learn from one another—or from other LEA leaders—in these areas?*

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<sup>2</sup> Burkauer, S. (2017). How much do school principals matter when it comes to working conditions? *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1). Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0162373716668028>.

## ***Establish and maintain grow-your-own (GYO) programs focused on keeping community members in rural communities.***

GYO teacher preparation programs recruit local paraprofessionals, after-school program staff, and other local community members to work toward teacher certification. Participants receive support such as financial aid, coaching, assistance in navigating credential requirements, counseling, and programmatic support as they complete their bachelor's degree and earn their teaching credential. GYO can include paraprofessional teacher training programs, teacher residency programs, high school cadet programs, teaching academies, and other strategies to interest secondary school students. LEAs can also pursue 2+2 programs, which allow candidates to begin teacher preparation at a community college. Research on GYO programs has demonstrated positive results in recruiting and retaining diverse teachers in the hardest-to-staff schools and leveraging participants' existing connections to the community and their prior experience working closely with the student population.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Offer candidates competitive overall compensation packages, potentially with the help of loan forgiveness.***

Ultimately, salary may be the most motivating factor for some teaching candidates. Being able to offer a salary slightly (or significantly) higher than neighboring LEAs may be the most straightforward way to recruit in rural areas. One way to increase the overall compensation offered to candidates is to offer tuition reimbursement or loan forgiveness. Such programs frequently target shortage areas (e.g., math, science, special education) and/or high-need locations (e.g., rural areas, low income schools), thereby providing a tool that supports both the supply and the distribution of well-prepared teachers within and across districts. Often loan forgiveness is conditional on a commitment to serve a certain number of years in the LEA in order to be eligible.

### **EXAMPLE IN ACTION:**



McCormick Rural Teacher Residency program is a partnership between rural McCormick County in South Carolina and the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA). The program offers a stipend, loan forgiveness, and even low-rent housing for student teachers who teach in rural communities. CERRA also has a Rural Recruitment Incentive program in place that provides financial incentives, and professional learning opportunities to districts with an average teacher turnover rate of 11 percent or higher.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). Solving the teacher shortage: How to attract and retain excellent educators. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>4</sup> National Center for Teacher Residencies. Who Residencies Serve. Retrieved at: <https://nctresidencies.org/about/who-residencies-serve/>.

## EXAMPLE IN ACTION:



In high poverty and very rural areas in Nebraska, the state offers “accelerated loan forgiveness,” which accelerates loan forgiveness to twice the normal rate through the Attracting Excellence to Teaching Program. Since it began in 2006, the program has recruited more than 1,100 new Nebraska teachers.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Focus recruitment on career changers and expand outreach to non-local candidates.***

Other sustainable recruitment strategies for rural LEAs include recruiting career-changers and engaging in “marketing” efforts that reach beyond the immediate geographic area. Alternative-certification programs can help adults with bachelor’s degrees in non-education fields become teachers. LEAs can also re-assess how they are marketing themselves to be sure that non-local candidates can learn about the benefits of the school and the broader community. For effective practices on enhancing your recruitment website and materials, see this brief.

**Resource:** *In considering the right recruitment/marketing strategy, rural LEAs can consult with the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy resource describing considerations and advantages for each of four types of rural districts.*

### ***Maintain collaboration with educator preparation programs as a recruitment strategy.***

Early and frequent collaboration between LEAs and educator preparation programs can enable ongoing placement of students in the LEA for student teaching or other field work opportunities. LEAs should make a practice of regular visits to educator preparation classes to talk about the benefits of working in their LEA, and be proactive in placing student teachers in their schools. One way for LEAs and local educator preparation programs to maintain a collaborative relationship is to share data on an ongoing basis and work together on aligning goals and expectations for program graduates, based on the districts’ unique needs.

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<sup>5</sup> Nebraska Department of Education. (2017). Attracting Excellence to Teaching Program (AETP): Status of the program as of December 2017. Lincoln, NE: Author. Retrieved from <https://2x9dwr1yq1e1dw6623gg411-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-AETP-Overview.pdf>

# Reflection Questions:

- *What routines does your district have in place to regularly connect with local educator preparation programs?*
- *How can you create more opportunities for educator preparation candidates to learn about or be placed in your schools?*

## **Help foster deliberate relationships for early career teachers, with both colleagues and instructional leaders.**

Retention of novice teachers in schools is driven by a good professional fit, specifically:

- interests and goals;
- relational trust with colleagues and leaders;
- and collective responsibility among colleagues for setting expectations, maintaining discipline, and helping one another.<sup>6,7</sup>

Studies of rural educators similarly found that close relationships with supportive school colleagues and administrators strongly contributed to teachers' decisions to remain in the profession.<sup>8</sup> Induction and mentoring programs are one approach to fostering these types of relationships, for example by making mentor assignments to role- and subject-alike colleagues for early career teachers and those new to the school or LEA. In small LEAs, collaboration across schools or among similar LEAs may help to provide mentors in the same subject area or role.

## **Create strong learning communities characterized by collaborative relationships.**

Invest in policies, structures, practices and routines that support strong and effective professional learning communities (PLCs) among school and district colleagues and potentially through partnership with other districts. Rural schools and LEAs that are characterized by strong, collaborative learning communities create a culture that values and promotes collaboration and ongoing learning for teachers. This type of professional collaboration and shared decision-making contributes to teachers feeling connected to a

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<sup>6</sup> Pogodzinski, B., Youngs, P., & Frank, K. A. (2015). Collegial climate and novice teachers' intent to remain teaching. *American Journal of Education*, 120(1), 27–54.

<sup>7</sup> Heineke, A. J., Mazza, B. S., & Tichnor-Wagner, A. (2014). After the two-year commitment: A quantitative and qualitative inquiry of Teach for America teacher retention and attrition. *Urban Education*, 49(7), 750–82.

<sup>8</sup> Goodpaster, K. P. S., Adedokun, O. A., & Weaver, G. C. (2012). Teachers' perceptions of rural STEM teaching: Implications for rural teacher retention. *Rural Educator*, 33(3), 9–22.

team and affects teachers' decisions about where to teach and whether to stay.<sup>9</sup> You can read more about how to engage teacher leaders in PLCs in this brief.

### ***Enable ongoing professional growth and learning for educators through different teacher leadership roles.***

Rural learning environments most likely to recruit and retain educators offer professional learning not just as an on-ramp to the profession, but also as a means to ongoing growth and development for educators. To build school and LEA capacity for creating strong learning environments, rural schools can create a range of teacher leadership roles, including mentor positions, and connections to professional networks fostered between schools and with other LEAs. In order to identify teachers to serve as leaders, consider those with dispositions including “persuasiveness, open-mindedness, flexibility, and confidence,”<sup>10</sup> as well as the ability to listen to others, develop positive relationships, continuously improve their practice, and be self-reflective.<sup>11</sup> When deciding what leadership roles will be most useful, consider what roles best support existing instructional priorities within schools or how to align teacher leadership with goals of PLCs. For more information about effective practices, see this guide on educator career ladders.

## Reflection Questions:

- *What do you know from data and feedback (such as a teacher survey) about perceptions of school culture, opportunities for collaboration, and mentoring in your district/school?*
- *Are teachers satisfied with the leadership and growth opportunities available in your school/district?*

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<sup>9</sup> Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). Solving the teacher shortage: How to attract and retain excellent educators. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>10</sup> The Aspen Institute. (2014). Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. Available at <http://www.aspendri.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2402&download>

<sup>11</sup> Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at <https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf>

**Resources:** *The Battelle for Kids Rural Collaborative Network is focused on “innovative approaches to essential rural education challenges, such as opportunity gaps, economic self-sufficiency, educator talent development, and learning for life and work. This large, national rural education network that includes 490 districts across 14 collaboratives enables districts to learn from each other, leverage joint funding opportunities and reduce educator isolation.*

**Resources:** *The National Rural Education Association is an organization of rural school administrators, teachers, board members, regional service agency personnel, researchers, business and industry representatives and others. District and school leaders can access research, legislative and advocacy updates, and notices of relevant opportunities on the organization’s website.*







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**DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:**  
Pennsylvania's System for LEA/School Improvement  
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