

School Leader Recruitment and Retention in Rural Schools



Rural school districts have noted that it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain high performing principals in their school districts. Research shows that there are a variety of factors associated with this challenge including low salaries, geographic location, social isolation, high demands from school districts and community members, and the lack of a supportive work environment.⁶ **In response to these challenges, the following evidence-based strategies can be implemented to improve recruitment and retention efforts in rural communities.**

Establish principal training programs



Superintendents are searching for principals that can “fit in” with the local community, which includes understanding the local political, social, and cultural values which may not be understood by outsiders.² Many rural school districts are turning to the “growing your own” approach to overcome the disconnect between principals and the local context.^{9,8} This approach can be particularly useful in rural communities that hold very specific social, cultural, and political values that are crucial to educational and leadership success. Rather than trying to mold a newly recruited principal, districts can work to empower their teachers through principal training programs.¹

Create professional networks between rural school principals

Principals in rural districts have less administrative support than suburban counterparts which can leave them overwhelmed at work and socially isolated from colleagues. A potential strategy for retaining school leaders is to create professional networks between rural school principals. These networks show promise in combating feelings of isolation as they provide principals the opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other’s challenges and successes.⁵



Provide professional development and mentorship

Another strategy to aid retention efforts is to provide professional development and mentorship opportunities. By providing principals the opportunity to take courses and learn from other professionals, they can enhance their leadership and organizational skills.^{7,4} Mentorships are also beneficial for incoming principals to learn basic skills they may not have been exposed to in the past and can provide long-term assistance as principals progress through their careers.³

¹Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2012). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *The Rural Educator*, 34(1), 1-13.

²Cruzeiro, P. A., & Boone, M. (2009). Rural and small school principal candidate: Perspectives of hiring superintendents. *The Rural Educator*, 31(1), 1-9.

³Duncan, H. E., & Stock, M. J. (2010) Mentoring and coaching rural school leaders: What do they need? *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18(3), 293-311. DOI:10.1080/13611267.2010.492947.

⁴Enomoto, E. K. (2012). Professional development for rural school assistant principals. *Planning & Changing*, 43(3/4), 260-279.

⁵Hite, J. M., Reynolds, B., & Hite, S. J. (2010). Who ya gonna call? Networks of rural school administrators. *The Rural Educator*, 32(1), 11-28.

⁶Howley, A., & Pendarvis, E. D. (2002). *Recruiting and retaining rural school administrators*. [Charleston, WV : Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, AEL, 2002].

⁷Grissom, J. A., & Harrington, J. R. (2010). Investing in administrator efficacy: An examination of professional development as a tool for enhancing principal effectiveness. *American Journal of Education*, (4), 583. Doi:10.1086/653631.

⁸Versland, T. M. (2013). Principal efficacy: Implications for rural “Grow Your Own” leadership programs. *The Rural Educator*, 35(1), 1-10.

⁹Wood, J. N., Finch, K., & Mirecki, R. M. (2013). “If we get you, how can we keep you? Problems with recruiting and retaining rural administrators.” *The Rural Educator*, 34 (2), 1-13.