



Rural School Funding News Special Series: Financing Rural Schools: Characteristics of Strong Rural School Finance Systems

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In this series, Rural School Funding News is reviewing general principles of school finance and sharing information about school funding systems that support rural schools and their unique characteristics and needs. While there are no easy answers to questions about how to fund schools, especially in this economic climate, we hope that these articles will provide you promising practices, ideas for advocacy, and guidelines that are easily transferable in your analysis and work on your own school finance systems.

If you are new to the series, you can review a brief introduction to the subject and discussion of Characteristic 1: A Strong Foundation Formula, [here](#); Characteristic 2: Effective Use of the Judicial System, [here](#); Characteristic 3: Fair Accounting for Cost of Living and Geographic Differences, [here](#); Characteristic 4: Recognition of the Benefits of Small Schools, [here](#); Characteristic 5: A Balance of Revenue Sources for Schools, [here](#); Characteristic 6: Efficiency in the State Revenue System, [here](#); Characteristic 7: Equity and Adequacy, [here](#); and Characteristic Eight: An Accurate Match of Resources to Needs, [here](#).

Characteristic Nine: Sufficient Pay and Other Supports to Ensure Teacher Quality

Teachers' salaries are by far the largest portion of school district budgets. And because a strong teaching force is critical to students' success, a good school finance system must account for the costs associated with getting and keeping successful teachers in all schools. Unfortunately, teacher recruitment and retention have historically been serious challenges for many rural districts. For these reasons, teacher issues are key for advocates working to improve school finance systems in their state.

Sometimes teacher finance issues are obscured by state regulations related to required degrees and training. Often, state or local salary schedules are the only significant policy mechanisms related to teacher finance. But these measures may not mean much to rural schools that are unable to attract or keep all the teachers they need in the first place.

The rural context. More than 400,000 teachers work in rural schools in the U.S. Most of these teachers work in contexts and face challenges that are different from those in more urban settings. For example, rural teachers are more likely than other teachers to have multiple teaching assignments and to be required by NCLB to become "highly qualified" in more than one subject. Yet, rural teachers have less access to college courses and less access to professional development and mentoring. Moreover, what is provided is infrequently targeted to rural circumstances or need.

Other challenges may be even more important.

Lower salaries. On average, rural teachers and administrators in the U.S. earn about \$10,000 less than their counterparts in non-rural schools. In some states the gap between high-paying urban and suburban districts and rural districts runs closer to \$20,000 for teachers with similar characteristics.

Previous articles in this series have discussed some of the funding mechanisms that account for this difference: rural districts generally have lower levels of overall funding than other districts; funding formulas rarely account fully for expenses associated with geography, isolation, or scale. Rural districts have lower property wealth and therefore generate less local revenue for schools. State salary scales that tie pay to experience and degrees penalize rural teachers who have less access to college and therefore less ability to earn higher degrees. Some states include so-called cost of living indices in their salaries scales, which usually serve to subsidize salaries in affluent districts and discount salaries in rural areas. Even the federal Title I program shifts money out of poorer and smaller rural districts and into larger districts with lower poverty rates.

All of these factors mean rural schools are on an unequal playing field in the competition for teachers.

Isolation. Recruitment and retention challenges are even more severe in isolated or remote rural schools because local communities do not have the retail, medical, and entertainment amenities that people, especially young people, from urban areas are accustomed to. Isolated schools need targeted incentives to attract and keep teachers.

High poverty rural schools. The rural schools with the most severe teacher recruitment and retention issues are located in high-poverty communities. These schools have the lowest average teacher salaries in the nation. They almost always lack basic teaching materials, equipment, books, and playground equipment. And, their buildings are often in severe disrepair. Recruitment and retention challenges are worsened when the rural school is either very isolated or located close to more affluent districts where teachers can easily transfer.

These tough working conditions are not the only difficulties for teachers in high-poverty rural schools. Unlike, urban areas where teachers can work in a high-poverty school and live in a more affluent neighborhood with better resourced schools for their own children, working in a high-poverty rural school usually also means living in a high-poverty community. High poverty rural communities have little in the way of housing, health care, recreation, or other amenities to offer prospective teachers. They usually lack jobs for spouses and provide weaker educational opportunities for children. Teaching in these schools require sacrifices few experienced or prospective teachers are willing to make.

All these conditions should be addressed in discussions about rural teachers and the resources they need.

Policies that work

The salaries it takes. Strong school finance systems should provide all students with equal access to high quality teachers. This means the finance system should provide poor districts with the capacity to recruit and retain excellent teachers. The key principle here is: what does it cost to get an excellent teacher to choose to work long-term in a challenging high-poverty rural school?

The question is *not*: what does it cost to live in a low-income rural community?

Proving the “salary it takes” may mean providing teachers in high poverty rural schools with significantly higher salaries than teachers in other schools. Policies to increase pay should not be limited to new teachers or punish strong teachers who are already working in the school.

It should be noted that statewide “across the board” (for all districts) salary increases will not eliminate inequities between rural and non-rural districts. Strong funding systems should eliminate the rural salary gap.

By increasing overall salaries in poor rural schools and providing targeted incentives (higher pay) for “hard-to-staff” schools and subjects, a good finance system can help the poorest districts compete for teachers. But the policy details matter and the amount of the financial incentive makes a big difference in how effective these types of policies are.

Better working conditions and supports. Attracting teachers to challenging rural places will take more money. But higher salaries are not enough. Competitive salaries must be accompanied by adequate materials, distance learning technology, high quality professional development and pre-service training targeted to conditions in rural schools as well as opportunities for teachers to network and collaborate with other teachers and receive other in school-supports.

Grow-Your-Own programs. Rural and low-wealth schools need teachers who want to be there and who understand and respect student cultures. The most committed rural teachers often come from rural communities. High quality grow-your-own programs that support local residents, including adults who may not have been in the workforce, to become well-trained teachers can address some of the staffing problems in rural schools.

College and university programs. Higher education plays a critical role in addressing rural teaching challenges. Colleges that work with rural schools to develop pre-service programs that offer rural practicums, multiple certification options, and flexible grow-your-own options help prospective teachers develop the skills and contacts needed in rural settings. School-college partnerships for professional development and mentoring can also support and strengthen the rural teaching force.

Technology. Technology, and technology training, that supports distance learning for rural students and teachers is essential for rural schools. It not only allows schools to share teaching resources and offer low-demand classes, it enables teachers to share expertise and to access professional development and college classes.

Community engagement and support. Community residents and parents also play a vital role in developing school programs and policies and in supporting teachers. Community residents can help new teachers improve their cultural understanding and awareness, bridge gaps between school and community, and become socially connected and rooted in the community.

Working for a Stronger Teaching Force

If a state has serious disparities in teacher pay among districts or if rural districts struggle to staff their schools with high quality teachers, the state does not have an equitable or adequate finance system. Advocates who desire a better school funding formula for rural schools must include issues of teacher pay and support on any checklist of rural-friendly policies.

Three basic questions can help you analyze whether your state supports rural teachers:

- Are salaries and benefits equitable for all rural teachers?
- Are there additional pay and support incentives for hard-to-staff rural districts?
- Are there additional policies and programs to improve rural teacher quality and retention, including grow-your-own teacher programs, rural components in teacher training programs, and research on other strategies that specifically addresses rural contexts?

The following resources can help explain best practices for financially supporting the staffing needs of rural districts.

Read more:

- Hammer, P.C., Hughes, G., McClure, C., Reeves, C., & Salgado, D. (2005) *Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention Practices: A review of the research literature, national survey of rural superintendents, and case studies of programs in Virginia*. Charleston, WV: Edvantia, Inc. www.edvantia.org/products/pdf/Rural%20Recruitment%20Report.pdf
- Hobbs, V. (2004). *The Promise and the Power of Distance Learning in Rural Education* (Policy Brief). Rural School and Community Trust. www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2067
- Jimerson, L. (2002). *The Competitive Disadvantage: Teacher Compensation in Rural America* (Policy Brief). Rural School and Community Trust. www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2064
- Jimerson, L. (2004). *Teachers and Teaching Conditions in Rural Texas* (Policy Brief). Rural School and Community Trust, www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2065
- Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2009). *Why Rural Matters 2009: State and Regional Challenges and Opportunities*. Rural School and Community Trust, 2009. www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2312

Read more from the March 2011 Rural Policy Matters.

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