The Current and Future Teacher Shortage: Teacher Recruitment and Retention Policy for Oklahoma’s Rural Schools

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Abstract:

Oklahoma is experiencing a crisis in education. Among the host of education issues impacting the state, a massive teacher shortage is crippling Oklahoma’s ability to provide a well-trained teacher in every classroom and a quality education for every student. With over half of the state’s schools and over 30 percent of students located in rural areas, this shortage is particularly devastating to rural schools. Because of a toxic education climate and low salaries, rural districts are losing veteran teachers to retirement, other professions, and bordering states. These districts are also losing potential new teachers to urban and suburban school districts and other states, leaving rural schools with unfilled positions or individuals with non-teaching backgrounds. To make matters worse, declining numbers of individuals in teacher certification programs and increasing teacher demand from higher student enrollment ensure that this teacher shortage will continue to grow for the next five years or longer. Nevertheless, research literature and policies from other states reveal that effective teacher recruitment and retention strategies can inform policy options for Oklahoma. These strategies can take the form of grow-your-own initiatives, targeted incentives, improved recruitment and hiring practices, and improved school-level support for teachers. Yet, to be effective, these strategies must be strategic, specific to hard-to-staff schools or subject areas, sustained, and rooted in the community. These recommendations are only meant to serve as the foundation for future research and policy discussions surrounding the teacher shortage affecting rural schools. However, state policymakers and educators must immediately begin to consider the plight of rural schools alongside the host of other education issues facing Oklahoma. Only by implementing policies directed at the unique problems of teachers in rural schools can Oklahoma ensure the survival of its rural schools, the wellbeing of its rural communities, and the success of its rural students.

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Teacher Recruitment and Retention Policy for Oklahoma’s Rural Schools

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Education Studies Senior Capstone  
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Executive Summary

Oklahoma is experiencing a crisis in education. Among the host of education issues impacting the state, a massive teacher shortage is crippling Oklahoma’s ability to provide a well-trained teacher in every classroom and a quality education for every student. With over half of the state’s schools and over 30 percent of students located in rural areas, this shortage is particularly devastating to rural schools. Because of a toxic education climate and low salaries, rural districts are losing veteran teachers to retirement, other professions, and bordering states. These districts are also losing potential new teachers to urban and suburban school districts and other states, leaving rural schools with unfilled positions or individuals with non-teaching backgrounds. To make matters worse, declining numbers of individuals in teacher certification programs and increasing teacher demand from higher student enrollment ensure that this teacher shortage will continue to grow for the next five years or longer.

Nevertheless, research literature and policies from other states reveal that effective teacher recruitment and retention strategies can inform policy options for Oklahoma. These strategies can take the form of grow-your-own initiatives, targeted incentives, improved recruitment and hiring practices, and improved school-level support for teachers. Yet, to be effective, these strategies must be strategic, specific to hard-to-staff schools or subject areas, sustained, and rooted in the community.

Based on this research, this report compiles six state-level policy recommendations targeted at attracting individuals to the education profession, recruiting teachers to rural schools, and retaining teachers in rural schools. These six recommendations are for the state to:

1) Create a “grow-your-own” teacher recruitment program to target certain rural populations to enter teacher certification programs and return to teach in rural schools.

2) Expand alternative certification paths by targeting specific rural populations or partnering with organizations in order to recruit, train, and place teacher candidates into rural schools.

3) Implement targeted financial incentives that are specific for hard-to-fill positions in rural schools and that correspond with the needs of teachers living in the district.

4) Create a state-district recruitment partnership to improve access for potential teachers to rural teaching positions and to coordinate rural districts’ recruiting and marketing efforts.
5) Strengthen Oklahoma’s mentorship and induction program by funding stipends for mentor teachers and allowing retired teachers to serve as mentors.

6) Pilot a teacher-leader program in rural districts to provide effective teachers with opportunities for additional roles and compensation and an incentive to remain in rural schools.

These recommendations are only meant to serve as the foundation for future research and policy discussions surrounding the teacher shortage affecting rural schools. However, state policymakers and educators must immediately begin to consider the plight of rural schools alongside the host of other education issues facing Oklahoma. Only by implementing policies directed at the unique problems of teachers in rural schools can Oklahoma ensure the survival of its rural schools, the wellbeing of its rural communities, and the success of its rural students.
Introduction

Oklahoma is experiencing a crisis in education. A combination of funding issues, new English and math standards, low teacher salaries, an unproven teacher evaluation system, and controversies surrounding testing and the state’s A-F report cards for schools have placed education at the forefront of the public consciousness. However, no issue has received as much attention as the state’s current teacher shortage. With a workforce consisting of almost 42,000 teachers, Oklahoma has experienced a massive outflow of teachers from the profession and the state over the past seven years. Citing a toxic climate created by state mandates, low salaries, and funding cuts, teachers are leaving the classroom, resulting in an exponential increase of emergency teaching certificates being issued as well as the elimination of courses. When individuals with no educational background are teaching, courses are being eliminated, and class sizes are increasing, Oklahoma students lose.

Despite the attention that the statewide teacher shortage is receiving, little notice has been given to the plight of Oklahoma’s rural schools as they grapple with the crisis. In Oklahoma, over half of the schools are rural, and 31.8 percent of the student population are rural students. In the context of the teacher shortage, rural districts lack the supply of educators needed to fill positions as well as the larger administrations, bigger budgets, and more amenities found in urban and suburban districts that aid recruitment efforts. Also, with many rural districts located near Oklahoma’s border, rural districts are losing teachers to the higher salaries, better benefits, and more educational support provided by districts in neighboring states. The problem of the current teacher shortage, however, is further compounded by a looming disparity between teacher supply and demand in rural schools. A continuing decline in individuals entering and completing educator preparation programs in the state and expected deficits of teachers moving to rural areas to take positions allude to an extended teacher shortage for Oklahoma’s rural schools.

Rural Oklahoma schools are facing an uncertain future. However, solutions that could support rural schools in recruiting and retaining teachers do exist, and it is imperative that educators, communities, and policymakers begin to consider potential state-level policies to address the rural teacher shortage. This report is intended to serve as a catalyst for this discussion. It briefly assesses Oklahoma’s past and current teacher policies, which can inform our understanding of the current shortage and possible solutions. This report also reviews the quantitative and qualitative evidence behind the current teacher shortage in rural schools as well as projections for the disparity in educator supply and demand for the state’s rural regions. It then turns to broader research on the effectiveness of teacher recruitment and retention strategies and to policies enacted in other states. Finally, this report uses the research on successful strategies to conclude with several policy and research recommendations for the benefit of Oklahoma’s rural schools.
An Overview of Oklahoma’s Teacher Policies

Oklahoma has a long and complicated history with education reform. The evolution of the state’s policies regarding teachers, from their certification to their compensation, clearly reflects this history. (For more information on the policies enacted and their date of implementation, see Figure 1.) In the 1980s and 1990s, Oklahoma paved the way for high quality teaching and the recruitment of an adequate teaching force. Oklahoma became the first state in the nation to require an entry-year internship for beginning teachers. It also created an alternative certification process to address the shortage of foreign language, math, and science teachers and mandated a minimum salary schedule for the state’s school districts as an attempt to equalize pay. In the early 2000s, the legislature enacted the Teacher Shortage Employment Incentive Program as another attempt to recruit and retain science and math teachers. Although the legislature also modified the salary schedule and increased teacher pay several times, the effectiveness of the programs implemented in the first two decades of education reform remains in question.

Over the next fifteen years, Oklahoma experienced the highs and lows of fast-paced education reform during volatile economic times. A plan for a four-year salary increase implemented in 2004 was halted in 2006, and salaries have remained at that level ever since. Certification requirements were later eased for candidates who did not complete a teacher preparation program, and the legislature approved a path to certification for Teach For America corps members when the program arrived in Tulsa in 2009. However, because of budget shortfalls, the state ended the Oklahoma Teacher Induction Program in 2010, and even though the program was restored as the Teacher Residency Program in 2014, a lack of funding has hampered its complete revitalization.

Recently, state officials have directed much of their focus to alleviating the current teacher shortage. In 2015, the legislature passed Senate Bill 20 to ease requirements for the certification of out-of-state teachers. It also enacted House Bill 1521 to provide incentive pay for the recruitment and retention of teachers. Furthermore, in September 2015, the State Department of Education formed the Teacher Shortage Task Force to find solutions to the current teacher shortage. A preliminary report released in December 2015 outlined policy options for the legislature before the opening of the 2016 legislative session. (Five recommendations targeting recruitment and retention are highlighted in Figure 2.) Unfortunately, the legislature’s preoccupation with a $1.3 billion budget shortfall has prevented any serious consideration of these solutions. Nevertheless, the recommendations have merit in the context of teacher recruitment and retention for the state’s rural schools, and some of these recommendations will be discussed in a later section.
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><strong>The Teacher Reform Act of 1980</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The Resident Teacher Program, an entry-year internship for</td>
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<td>beginning teachers, is implemented. Oklahoma is the first</td>
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<td>state in the nation to require such an internship.</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td><strong>House Bill 1017</strong></td>
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<td>• Recognizing the need for foreign language, math, and science</td>
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<td>teachers, HB 1017 creates an alternative certification process</td>
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<td>to allow schools to employ professionals with expertise in</td>
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<td>• As an attempt to equalize teacher pay, HB 1017 mandates a</td>
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<td>minimum salary schedule for the state’s school districts.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td><strong>Teacher Shortage Employment Incentive Program (TSEIP)</strong></td>
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<td>• The Teacher Shortage Employment Incentive Program is</td>
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<td>teachers. If an individual teaches at the secondary level in an</td>
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<td>Oklahoma public school for five years, TSEIP will reimburse</td>
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<td>the individual for eligible student loan expenses.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td><strong>Teacher Salary Increase Halted</strong></td>
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<td>• A 2004 plan to fund a four-year teacher salary increase is</td>
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<td>halted. The minimum salary schedule for a beginning teacher</td>
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<td>remains at $31,600.</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td><strong>Oklahoma Alternative Placement Program</strong></td>
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<td>• The Oklahoma Alternative Placement Program is implemented in order</td>
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<td>to provide opportunities for individuals with non-teaching degrees</td>
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<td>to teach in Oklahoma schools.</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td><strong>Oklahoma Teacher Induction Program Eliminated</strong></td>
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<td>• A budget shortfall induces the legislature to suspend the</td>
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<td>Oklahoma Teacher Induction Program, which provided</td>
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<td>mentorship and support during a teacher’s first year of teaching.</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td><strong>Oklahoma Teacher Residency Program Reinstated</strong></td>
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<td>• The Teacher Induction Program is reinstated as the Teacher</td>
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<td>Residency Program. However, no funding is provided for</td>
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<td>stipends for mentor teachers.</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td><strong>Senate Bill 20</strong></td>
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<td>• SB 20 allows teachers with out-of-state certificates and at</td>
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<td>least five years of teaching experience to receive certificates</td>
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<td>without taking certification exams.</td>
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<td><strong>House Bill 1521</strong></td>
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<td>• HB 1521 allows school districts to offer one-time bonuses to</td>
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<td>new or returning teachers.</td>
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Legislative Recommendation #1 – Retired teachers as mentors

With the reinstatement of the Teacher Residency Program in 2014, the task force recommended that the legislature amend the statute, which currently requires full-time employees to serve as mentors, to allow for retired teachers to serve in the mentor role.

Legislative Recommendation #3 – Recognition of Out-of-State Certification

Building upon the progress of Senate Bill 20, the task force recommended the removal of the requirement for teachers with out-of-state certificates to have five years experience to automatically receive an Oklahoma teaching certificate. This would allow for all certified teachers from other states to be certified in Oklahoma and bypass the state’s three certification exams.

Legislative Recommendation #7 – Teacher Recruitment Program

The task force recommended that the legislature adopt and fund a Teacher Recruitment program and enlist the business and education community to provide matching funds for its operation. The program should include targeted recruitment of high school and college students, professionals, and military personnel; greater awareness of current assistance programs, such as scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, available to teachers and teacher candidates; partnership with the business community to provide opportunities for teacher externships and summer jobs; and a long-term plan to promote the teaching profession.

Legislative Recommendation #8 – Pay and Multi-year Commitment for Student Teachers

Recognizing the need for teachers in high minority and high poverty schools, the task force proposed incentives to be offered to soon-to-be graduates of education preparation programs to teach in hard-to-staff schools. The primary incentive would take the form of a student teacher working as a teacher in their last semester of educator preparation under a regular contract, with the potential for a multi-year contract at the completion of their student teaching. Other incentives would include additional pay or loan forgiveness.

Legislative Recommendation #9 – Teacher-Leader Program with Extended Contract and Stipend

Based on evidence of teachers leaving their positions to become school administrators because of increased pay, the task force recommended that the state model the Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation System. The legislature would create a pilot program directing the State Department of Education to work with districts on different teacher/leader models. Districts would recommend teachers to be a model, mentor, or lead teacher or an instructional coach, and these teachers would receive an additional contract and stipend for their role.
A Closer Look at the Teacher Shortage

The Current Crisis
For the past two years, Oklahoma has been reeling from the worst effects of a drastic teacher shortage. However, the statewide teacher shortage has actually been years in the making. Since 2006, the number of educators leaving the public education system has increased. Although this higher attrition did little to affect the workforce in the first few years, the downturn of the economy corresponded with a downturn in the number of new educators entering the public education system. From 2009-2011, the increase in teachers leaving the system and the decline of new teachers created a net gap of over 1,100 teachers. According to the data, a subsequent increase in new teachers from 2011-2014 seems to have overcome the statewide gap by creating a net gain of almost 1,900 teachers. Nevertheless, the uneven distribution of new teachers and an increase in enrollment of more than 45,000 students, in a system of 680,000 students, since 2008 seem to bolster the fact that teacher supply still cannot meet the demand.

This disparity in teacher demand and supply is being particularly felt in the current 2015-2016 academic year. Even after the elimination of 850 courses and 600 teaching positions at the end of the 2014-2015 academic year, 1000 teaching vacancies remained in the first half of August 2015. The State Board of Education approved 1,037 emergency teaching certificates, more than the 825 emergency certificates issued in the previous four years, to place non-teachers in classrooms during the current academic year. Although the overall number of individuals with active certifications in Oklahoma grew 6 percent from 2009 to 2015, these certified educators are choosing to enter fields other than education.

In choosing to leave the education profession, teachers in Oklahoma identify stress as the primary reason. This stress comes from a toxic climate created by over-testing, the burden of standards being mandated by the state, and the lack of respect for teaching as a profession, especially from legislators. However, the issue of low pay compounds this toxic climate in schools and the state and the low morale of educators. Currently, the average teacher pay in Oklahoma is $45,000, which is $12,750 below the national average. Oklahoma teacher salaries have not increased since 2006, and real teacher salaries have actually decreased. In 2006, the average teacher with a bachelor’s degree and 5 years of experience earned a salary of $36,000 in 2015 dollars, and in 2015, the same teacher earned roughly $34,000, a decrease in earnings by $2,000. Some teachers are realizing that their own kids are eligible for free or reduced lunch because of their low salary. Moreover, teacher salaries are 28 percent lower than median salaries for similar workers in Oklahoma’s private sector. Such a disparity easily demonstrates the reasons for teachers leaving the profession to take jobs in the private sector.

So, how is the statewide teacher shortage particularly affecting rural schools?
First and foremost, rural schools are receiving the brunt of the disparities in teacher supply and demand. The majority of new teachers who entered the profession from 2011-2014 were located in the central region of the state, the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. The heavily rural regions, particularly the northwest, southwest, and southeast portions of the state, experienced little gains or continued to have large gaps between new and leaving teachers (see Figure 3). The disproportionate share of new teachers holding only an emergency certification in rural areas reinforces these gaps. During the 2013-2014 school year, new teachers in rural schools held 40 percent of emergency certifications in the state while only holding 27 percent of certifications overall.\textsuperscript{19} Even though this share has shrank some as the Oklahoma City and Tulsa school districts have requested more emergency certifications over the past two years, the data points to a decreasing trend of new teachers with standard certifications working in rural schools. Now, rural schools must rely heavily on emergency certifications in order to fill the gaps created by leaving teachers.

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Overall Gap Between New and Leaving Teachers by Region From 2010-11 to 2014-15}
\end{figure}

Modified from Source: Berg-Jacobson and Levin, \textit{Oklahoma Study of Educator Supply and Demand: Trends and Projections}

In addition to the gaps between supply and demand, the disparities between what Oklahoma offers its teachers and what the surrounding states offer are also seriously impacting rural districts. Average teacher pay in Oklahoma is $4,700 less than that of the six surrounding states.\textsuperscript{20} With many small rural districts lying along Oklahoma’s border, the short commutes from Oklahoma to school districts in other states can provide a big boost to teacher salaries and benefits. By teaching in Texas, Arkansas, or Kansas, new teachers living in Oklahoma can make commutes ranging from 15 minutes to an hour in order to receive $6,000 or more a year (see
School districts in other states are also actively recruiting teachers from Oklahoma through offers of higher salaries and robust support, including mentorships and the involvement of instructional coaches. The promise of better pay and benefits in neighboring states are stealing veteran teachers in rural Oklahoma districts as well as beginning Oklahoma teachers who could fill the numerous positions open in rural schools.

Taking a closer look at the evidence behind the teacher shortage reveals that rural schools are at a serious disadvantage in recruiting and retaining teachers. Not only are rural schools losing more new teachers to urban and suburban areas, but they are also losing veteran teachers and possible candidates to other states. Thus, rural schools must either rely on new teachers with emergency certifications to fill vacancies or go without teachers in schools that already have small numbers of staff. In a state experiencing a teacher crisis, rural schools are stuck between a rock and a hard place.

**The Future Gap**

To make matters worse, the statewide teacher shortage will not be going away anytime soon. According to projections of educator supply and demand in Oklahoma, the trend of increasing student enrollment suggests that the statewide demand for educators is likely to continue increasing until 2019 and beyond. This demand is expected to outpace educator supply, leaving the state with a small shortage for the foreseeable future. One explanation for this disparity between supply and demand is the declining number of individuals completing an educator-preparation program in Oklahoma. Already this number declined by 24 percent between the 2005-2006 and the 2013-2014 academic years. This situation is expected to worsen with another decline of 22 percent by 2018-2019. Such drastic decreases in the traditional route of educator preparation will not only affect the overall number of educators in the state but also force schools to increasingly rely on teachers with alternative, provisional, and emergency certifications.
Once again, the state’s rural schools are expected to receive the brunt of the effects of the gap between teacher supply and demand. When specifically considering the rural regions of the state, this mismatch is larger for the heavily rural regions than the more populous urban regions. In the northwest, southwest, and southeast portions of the state, the teacher shortage is predicted to gradually grow, leaving a gap of 2-4 percent by the 2018-2019 academic year (see Figure 5). The decline in the number of individuals completing traditional teacher preparation programs will only add to the decreasing amount of new teachers with traditional certifications being employed in rural schools. Yet, rural schools’ increasing reliance on teachers with alternative certifications is also in jeopardy. With the percentage of teachers entering the public education system from alternative certification programs declining by half since 2009, rural schools will likely be forced to rely more on new teachers with emergency certifications. In such a situation, rural schools will need to drastically increase their recruitment and retention efforts in order to both fill previous gaps and find individuals to meet larger demand for teachers.

Oklahoma’s rural schools are not only facing a tough time currently but also a bleak future in regards to gaining and maintaining an adequate teacher workforce. In addition to rural schools recruiting more teachers from both traditional and alternative certification programs, the state must also find ways to increase the number of individuals entering these programs in order to increase the overall supply of teachers. Special attention should be paid to channeling teachers to rural schools, as they will be the ones in most need in the near future if the projections hold.

Models of Success

In order to inform policy options for Oklahoma, research on the effectiveness of certain teacher recruitment and retention strategies as well as reviews of policies enacted in other states should be considered. According to the supply-and-demand framework, the goal of teacher recruitment and retention policies is to increase or adjust the rewards of teaching relative to other
occupations. The literature on state and district strategies focused around these rewards reveals four major strategies pertinent to the situation of rural schools in Oklahoma: 1) grow-your-own initiatives, 2) targeted incentives, 3) improved recruitment and hiring practices, and 4) improved school-level support for teachers. These strategies, along with examples of state policies, are provided in detail below.

1) **Grow-Your-Own Initiatives**
Grow-your-own initiatives are strategies that seek to improve access to teacher preparation programs for an array of individuals. The basis of grow-your-own initiatives is to utilize aspiring teachers’ tendency to prefer to return home to teach. These programs often target specific populations in local areas in order to provide them with a process of education, certification, and eventually placement in a local school. Collaboration among members of the community and teacher preparation programs are often involved in these strategies. According to the research, programs that target paraprofessionals already working in rural schools have shown promise. However, the research also reveals that such programs should be targeted at producing teachers in high-need subject areas or locales in order to alleviate shortages in critical areas.

### Virginia Teachers for Tomorrow Program

In 2004, Virginia created the Virginia Teachers for Tomorrow Program (VTFT), a precollege recruitment effort targeted at high school juniors and seniors interested in pursuing a career in education. The program offers a curricular experience and hands-on activities designed to expose students to the field of teaching. The purpose of VTFT is to attract students to eventually teach in critical-shortage and high-needs areas of the state. In 2012, VTFT was offered in 114 schools across the state. Although no research on its outcomes has been conducted, VTFT seems to remain a viable option for teacher recruitment.


2) **Targeted Incentives**

Although salaries are positively associated with retention, studies have pointed out that incentives other than salary are needed to recruit and retain teachers in rural areas. In order to be effective, these financial incentives must target teachers willing to teach in high-needs subject areas or school locales. These incentives must not only target teachers but should also target local challenges faced by teachers working in rural areas. Examples of such targeted incentives include tuition support, loan forgiveness, signing bonuses, and housing assistance.
Targeted Incentive Programs Across States

A variety of states offer targeted incentives for certain shortage areas. North Dakota and Texas provide loan forgiveness and repayment assistance programs for teacher candidates who teach at a grade level or in a content area in which a teacher shortage exists. Both Oklahoma and Texas also have loan repayment programs targeted to math and science teachers employed at high-needs or high-poverty schools. Other states, such as Mississippi and Alaska, have attempted to tackle housing issues by building teacher housing in rural areas or providing grants for districts to finance construction. Despite the plethora of programs, few specifically target rural schools, and no certain incentive has been identified as the best solution for rural recruitment and retention.


3) Improved Recruitment and Hiring Practices

The research literature reveals that some candidates choose not to seek or accept rural teaching positions based on inaccurate or incomplete information regarding rural areas and positions. In response to inaccurate information, efforts should be made to promote the advantages of living and teaching in rural areas, including the low cost of living, tight communities, and access to the outdoors. Also, in order to provide better access to rural teacher positions, a statewide clearinghouse for jobs or a common statewide application should be made available. Moreover, streamlined routes to credentialing that lower the barriers to entry into the teaching profession, including alternative certification programs and small testing regimes, should be highlighted and advocated for by rural schools.²⁹

Recruitment and Hiring Practices Across States

Several states have implemented simple practices and programs to improve the recruitment and hiring of teachers across the state, and that particularly impact rural schools. In Alaska, a partnership between the Alaska Department of Education and the University of Alaska maintains a statewide clearinghouse for job openings and for posting candidate résumés. Other states, including North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, have a common application form used across all districts. Also, all fifty states have some form of alternative certification to provide opportunities for individuals with non-teaching backgrounds to enter the field.

4) Improved School-Level Support for Teachers
In order to improve teacher recruitment, aspects of the teaching experience such as mentoring and induction programs, class sizes, teachers’ level of autonomy, and the amount of administrative support should be considered. Empirical research has found that schools that provide mentoring and induction programs have lower rates of attrition among beginning teachers. Although no clear strategies have been suggested for improving support for all teachers, researchers emphasize that only a supportive culture and working conditions in schools will keep teachers.\(^{30}\)

Iowa’s Teacher Quality Policies
Iowa provides both a multi-year induction program and a support system to retain high-quality teachers. The Iowa Mentoring and Induction Program is a two-year program that provides professional support and training for beginning teachers. An experienced teacher, who receives a $1,000 stipend to participate in the program, mentors every beginning educator. Iowa also recently implemented the Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation Program to retain high-quality teachers as teacher leaders in schools. This program provides effective teachers with additional roles as teacher leaders or instructional coaches as well as an additional contract and stipend. Despite its recent implementation, the program holds promise for retaining teachers and improving instruction in schools.


Additional Considerations from the Research Literature
In addition to the major strategies being used for recruiting and retaining teachers, the research literature points to four characteristics that effective recruitment and retention strategies share. Effective practices are: 1) strategic, 2) specific to the schools or subject areas that are hard to staff, 3) sustained, and 4) rooted in the community. A strategic program is one that employs relevant data to inform planning and decision-making, collaborates with appropriate actors at the state, district, and local levels, and utilizes available resources to improve outcomes. These efforts should not follow a broad, one-size-fits-all approach but, instead, focus on specific hard-to-staff schools or subjects. Also, for practices to be considered sustainable, programs should be reevaluated and adjusted often in order to ensure that they are aligned with the goals and expected outcomes of the approach. Finally, recruitment and retention practices should be rooted in the community by targeting teacher candidates who are familiar with the rural lifestyle and connected to the community through family or other means.\(^{31}\) By forming recruitment and retention policies around these characteristics, policymakers and educators can ensure that rural schools have a greater chance at maintaining an adequate teacher workforce.
Recommendations for Policy and Research

Rural schools in Oklahoma are facing three major recruitment and retention issues: 1) a decline in the number of individuals entering the education profession through traditional or alternative certification paths, 2) a decrease in the number of new teachers choosing to work in rural schools, and 3) an increase in the number of teachers leaving rural schools for another state or profession. In order to address these three major issues as well as the different components of each issue, policy solutions must follow a comprehensive approach to the teacher recruitment and retention pipeline. Based on the data behind the teacher shortage facing rural schools and research on effective strategies, this report includes six policy recommendations corresponding to the major points along the teacher recruitment and retention pipeline.

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**Attracting Individuals to the Education Profession**

**Recommendation #1: Create a Teacher Recruitment Program**

To target potential teacher candidates and provide incentives for entering the education profession, state policymakers should create and fund a grow-your-own recruitment program. This program should target high school and college students, paraprofessionals in schools, professionals, and military personnel who are from or live in rural areas to enter teacher certification programs. Participants would be made aware of scholarship and loan forgiveness programs offered by the state or universities and of both traditional and alternative certification paths that they could pursue. Following the recommendation of the Teacher Shortage Task

*Note: Despite the promise of increasing teacher salaries to retain teachers and improve the image of the teaching profession, this report does not consider compensation as an effective strategy to assist rural schools due to the state’s mandated salary schedule. Also, with public support growing for a proposition to raise teacher salaries that is to be voted on in November of this year, salary raises will likely be addressed in the near future. For more information on the effects of a teacher salary raise, see Matthew Hendricks, *An Empirical Analysis of Teacher Salaries and Labor Market Outcomes in Oklahoma*, 2015.*
Force, the state should partner with the business and nonprofit communities to fund the program, offer financial assistance, and promote the teaching profession. This program would focus on recruiting candidates that would return to rural schools, but research on high-needs subject areas in rural schools should also be conducted and incorporated in order to narrow targeting and alleviate the worst portions of the teacher shortage.

**Recommendation #2: Expand Alternative Certification Paths**
As new teachers with standard certifications are drawn to more urban schools, and as rural schools increasingly rely on teachers with alternative certifications, policymakers should look to alternative certification programs to provide more teacher candidates for rural schools. However, the substantial decline of teachers with alternative certifications entering the public school system requires that the state focus on feeding more individuals into these paths. Although the teacher recruitment program could assist in directing more individuals to alternative programs, research on the populations most likely to remain in rural schools after completing such programs should be conducted. Then alternative certification programs can be altered to target certain populations, such as paraprofessionals working in rural schools, and lower barriers for the entrance of these populations into the programs. In particular, the state could explore partnering with placement organizations, such as Teach For America, to expand efforts from urban areas into rural districts. Alternatively, the state could follow the example of Colorado’s Quality Teacher Recruitment Grant Program by providing grants to any organizations willing to recruit, train, and place teacher candidates into rural schools.\(^{32}\)

**Recruiting Teachers to Rural Schools**

**Recommendation #3: Implement Targeted Financial Incentives**
State policymakers should consider giving rural districts the authority as well as the funding to offer an array of financial incentives, including signing bonuses, housing assistance, scholarships, and loan forgiveness. However, these incentives must be specifically targeted to recruiting teachers for hard-to-fill positions. The type of incentive offered by a rural district should also correspond with the district’s ability to fund it as well as the needs of the teachers living in the district. Oklahoma already gave districts the ability to offer signing and retention bonuses to teachers with the passage of HB 1521 in 2015, but no additional funding for the bonuses hinder rural districts’ use of this incentive pay. Therefore, research on which incentives induce teachers to take and remain in positions in Oklahoma’s rural schools needs to be pursued in order to make this strategy effective.

**Recommendation #4: Create a State-District Recruitment Partnership**
A simple policy solution to bring potential teachers to rural districts is the creation of a joint recruitment partnership between the State Department of Education and rural districts. This partnership should implement a statewide clearinghouse for rural positions as well as a common application that will improve access for individuals searching and applying for teaching
positions. Moreover, this partnership could create an initiative, or the state could encourage rural districts to form consortia, to consolidate recruiting efforts as well as initiate a marketing effort to communicate the benefits of working in rural schools and living in rural communities. These strategies would allow rural districts to maximize the use of their limited resources and compete with the larger resources and well-known amenities of urban and suburban districts.

**Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools**

**Recommendation #5: Strengthen Oklahoma’s Mentorship and Induction Program**

Policymakers could drastically impact teacher retention in rural schools by strengthening the state’s Teacher Residency Program. Research suggests that the 2010 moratorium on the program was correlated with the major increases in teachers leaving the state’s public school system and the large decrease in new teachers. The 2014 reinstatement of the program combined with the research on the effectiveness of mentoring and induction programs on teacher retention holds promise for rural schools in keeping its new teachers. However, the lack of funding for mentor stipends and certain restrictions on the individuals who can be mentors have obstructed the program. Therefore, policymakers should allocate funding for mentor stipends in order to increase the number of mentor teachers. They should also follow the recommendation of the Teacher Shortage Task Force by allowing retired teachers, instead of only full-time employees, to serve as mentors. This small change could alleviate the burden on full-time teachers and provide new teachers in rural schools, as well as schools across the state, with much-needed support.

**Recommendation #6: Pilot a Teacher-Leader Program**

In addition to increased professional development, policymakers should implement a teacher-leader pilot program modeled after Iowa’s Teacher Leadership and Compensation Program. With high attrition rates of experienced teachers, rural schools need opportunities to provide rewards for teachers who are effective instructors and who remain in rural schools. As laid out in the Teacher Shortage Task Force’s report, the State Department of Education would work with districts to implement different teacher-leader models. Districts would recommend teachers to be a model, mentor, or lead teacher or an instructional coach, and these teachers would receive an additional contract and stipend for their role. By implementing this program specifically in rural districts, the state would give teachers the opportunity to assume leadership roles and receive more compensation in schools that have few opportunities for advancement other than becoming an administrator. Ultimately, such opportunities could improve working conditions and, in turn, teacher retention in rural schools. However, extensive research on the pilot programs would be required to understand what models are effective and sustainable.

These six policy recommendations, and the accompanying calls for further research, are not the final solutions for the teacher shortage affecting rural schools. These recommendations are
products of the combination of current policy outcomes and proposed policies, data behind the current and projected teacher shortages, and research on effective recruitment and retention strategies covered in this report. Even though all of them could be implemented in tandem to strengthen the entire teacher recruitment and retention pipeline, each policy could also be enacted individually according to current political viability and rural needs. Ultimately, these policy recommendations are only meant to serve as the foundation for future research and policy discussions.

Conclusion

Oklahoma’s rural schools are facing a teacher shortage crisis. Past teacher policies and economic hardship in the state have resulted in a massive teacher shortage. Rural schools are receiving the brunt of this crisis by losing new and experienced teachers to urban areas and bordering states, leaving rural districts to rely on teachers with emergency certifications or eliminate positions. Future projections of the levels of teacher supply and demand in the state also reveal that rural schools will not have the supply of teachers to meet increasing demand, worsening the already present gaps.

Despite this dismal situation, there is hope. Research and the work of other states point to successful recruitment and retention strategies that can benefit rural schools. This report has attempted to harness this work to lay out state-level policy options to assist rural schools. However, state policymakers and educators must immediately begin to consider the plight of rural schools alongside the host of other education issues facing Oklahoma. Only by implementing policies directed at the unique problems of teachers in rural schools can Oklahoma ensure the survival of its rural schools, the wellbeing of its rural communities, and the success of its rural students.

Endnotes


McKean, *Educational reform in Oklahoma*.


NCES, “State Education Data Profile – Oklahoma.”

“15 facts and stats,” *Tulsa World*.


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Hammer et al., *Rural Teacher Recruitment*.
