

Human Resource Management in Small Rural Districts: The Administrator's Role in Recruitment, Hiring and Staff Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to review the rural area administrator's role in the areas of teacher recruitment, hiring and staff development. State and Regional Policies reveal that these areas are chief among the concerns of rural school leaders (Johnson, 2005). The rural school administrator's role often requires him/her to become involved in every aspect of a school's functions. It is crucial for the rural administrator to understand the culture and expectations of the surrounding community in order to become successful in these endeavors (Helge, 1985). Teachers new to the district need to be given assistance in adapting to the day-to-day functions of their schools. They need specific information about the culture surrounding the school and the community. Seeking individuals most likely to be sold on the benefits of teaching in a rural school is recommended. Such individuals usually have rural backgrounds, personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them for life in a rural area (Collins, 1999).

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Largest Number of Students Attending Schools in Rural Areas is in Texas

Jerry Johnson (2005), the State and Regional Policies Studies Manager, reported that 27% (12.5 million) public school students attend school in towns with populations of less than 25,000. The study revealed that 19% (8.8 million) pupils attended school in towns with populations smaller than 2,500. I am a practicing administrator in the lone star state and I do not find it surprising that Texas is the state with the largest number of students attending schools in rural areas.

An earlier study, conducted by the National Education Association (NEA, 1998), found that 38% of America's school age children attended public schools in rural districts and small towns. By comparing this percentage to the percentage reported in the Johnson study, readers can see that the number of students attending schools in rural areas has increased.

The Johnson study reported that at least 49% of American schools are located in rural areas and that 40% of all public school teachers' work at rural schools. It is notable that rural schools often employ the largest number of people in their communities.

Teachers deciding to live in rural areas often do so with specific purposes in mind. Often the turn over for rural teachers is low. This can become political as teachers and support staff members compete for local jobs. Therefore, administrators in rural areas must stay abreast of student needs, community events, work toward building positive relationships with community leaders, and provide sufficient motivation for staff members to work effectively to meet the needs of the students. This is no small undertaking.

Current Teacher Shortage in Rural Areas

In chapter 11 of his book, *William Kritsonis, PHD on Schooling* (2002), Dr. Kritsonis states that there is currently a teacher shortage. He goes on to say that this shortage is especially high in some geographic areas and in some subject areas such as Mathematics. This is true in many rural areas where perspective teachers may find the smaller salary and the social aspects associated with a rural community unpalatable. After the passage of The No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, rural area administrators have found themselves attempting to "grow" math and other specialty teachers in order to meet certification requirements for highly qualified teachers (Collins, 1999).

Public schools depend on governmental funding to stay open. In order to meet one of the many requirements to receive these monies, administrators must sign an attestation form each year. The campus principal's attestation is an assurance that teachers on the campus are certified to teach the subjects to which they have been assigned. This places even more pressure on rural administrators as they try to recruit the necessary personnel. Rural educators are more likely to be assigned to teach outside of their certification area.

Rural Administrators Have Difficulty Finding Qualified Teachers

A review of the literature shows that rural administrators have difficulty finding qualified teachers who fit in with the school and community and who will stay with the job. Often the perfect teacher is the one who is certified to teach more than one subject or grade level. Teachers in rural locations must also be able and willing to adjust to the community. In some cases teachers must be willing to work toward additional certification. Many districts have begun to provide incentives and extra pay for teachers who are willing to under take the extra training (NEA, 1998).

It is no secret that teachers in rural schools can expect to have smaller incomes. It is also a fact that some teachers are less likely to have health insurance benefits provided by the school district (NEA, 1998). While salary is a great deterrent in the recruitment of qualified teachers for small rural schools, the feeling of isolation is often the first reason cited as one of the negatives when looking at rural life. Newly hired teachers report feelings of social, cultural, and professional isolation. One survey cited geographic isolation, weather, distance from larger communities, distance from family, and inadequate shopping as reasons for leaving a rural area teaching position (Collins, 1999). As a recruiter for my small rural district, I was told that the lack of entertainment was also a factor to those deciding against teaching in a rural area.

Calling on personal experience and a review of literature, I believe teacher recruiters must look for candidates with rural backgrounds, personal characteristics, or educational experiences that predispose them for life in a rural area (Collins, 1999). These individuals are most likely to be sold on the benefits of teaching in a rural area school.

Helping New Teachers Overcome Feelings of Isolation

To help new teachers overcome the feeling of isolation, administrators need to conduct some of the activities on the following list (Collins, 1999):

1. Provide a mentor teacher,
2. Provide quality in service,
3. Provide school-community orientation,

4. Select the first assignment with care,
 - a. Set clear goals,
 - b. Welcome feedback,
 - c. Establish an non-threatening environment,
 - d. Provide opportunities to interact with parents and peers,
5. Streamline paperwork,
6. Provide time for the new teacher to visit in other classrooms, and
7. Encouraging workshop participation

The campus level administrator increases the chances for ensuring teachers' satisfaction with their choice of teaching as a career by helping new teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to school reform, and improved student achievement. It is also important for campus level administrators to help experienced teachers in the acquisition of new skills (Collins, 1999).

Often rural teachers have been on the job, in the same grade level, at the same school for many years. These teachers may have experienced many curriculum changes and had many different administrators during a long career. Long time teachers may also be related to members of the school board and/or attend social functions with them. This makes it necessary for all administrators to encourage two-way communication with teachers and to share data with teachers as soon as it becomes available. Keeping the lines of communication open and expectations high can help campus level administrators avoid many pitfalls associated with the culture of small communities where the chain of command lines can become blurred.

Characteristics of Successful Rural School Staff Development Programs

Doris Helge (1985) identified the characteristics for a successful rural school staff development programs as the following:

1. Involving teachers in the planning stage,
2. Gathering specialized resources for teaching,
3. Integrating of rural focused content especially when working with disadvantaged students,
4. Seeking and acquiring additional funding and equipment,
5. Using the community as a resource,
6. Relating effectively with the community,
7. Using the latest technology, and
8. Incorporating alternate instructional arrangements for special needs populations.

Professional development is critical for the success of school improvement initiatives and subsequent student achievement. It is imperative that administrators place high priority on the continual professional development of teachers and support staff at

the school. Research and experience says that the campus level administrator's role in teacher professional is critical. Offering specific examples to illustrate research-based strategies are effective in encouraging and supporting the continued professional development of teachers (Helge, 1985).

By participating in professional growth activities and sharing in learning and skill development activities with teachers, the campus level administrator demonstrates a commitment to continual learning and serves as a role model for the faculty (Payne & Wolfson, 2000). Information on the activities of the campus level administrator travels quickly and widely in a small school. Therefore, it is beneficial for the campus level administrator to follow up the application of training and to plan program supports.

By setting an example as a lifelong learner, administrators help to mold the culture of the school as a learning organization where professional development is the norm. When the campus level administrator models continual learning, the support staff is more likely to focus on their own professional development. The campus level administrator can experience with teachers the feelings associated with the learning of new skills and begin to discuss new ideas and possible ways to improve the school. Student achievement will have the opportunity to increase as the knowledge and skills of the teaching staff increases. Teacher learning is encouraged when the campus level administrator participates in the learning. Both the campus level administrator and the teachers benefit from learning together (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

The campus level administrator is the leader of his/her learning organization. If schools are indeed learning organizations, then the campus level administrator must establish the expectation that all members should focus on their own professional growth and work cooperatively with others to increase student learning. Through individual and group assessment and discussions about needed improvement, the campus level administrator and faculty members must determine ways that professional development can help them achieve the mission, goals, and objectives of the school. By careful planning and linking professional development to school improvement, campus level administrators and teachers work to that ensure student learning is the central focus for professional development. Together, they also ensure that professional development is ongoing (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Importance of Mentoring Programs and Professional Development

The campus level administrator must ensure that new teachers are initiated into the culture of the school. Through teacher mentoring programs, new teachers formally and informally learn that the school is an organization that emphasizes professional growth. Schools can exhibit this commitment to the development of new teachers by developing mentoring programs (Collins, 1999).

Specific training should be provided to target new teachers and cover basic concerns that a new teacher needs to understand in order to feel comfortable. A mentor teacher at each level supports each new teacher in his or her classroom. Master teachers should be encouraged to facilitate monthly seminars, lead discussions, and model "best

practices” on topics such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning strategies, and adolescent development. In addition, each new teacher is assigned a mentor teacher who provides assistance in the day-to-day functions of the school. Informal information about the culture surrounding the school and the community can also be disseminated. In a formal evaluation of the mentoring program, new teachers reported a high degree of satisfaction and a strong sense of support during the critical beginning stages of their teaching career (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Building level administrators must empower their faculty and hold them accountable for setting personal goals and for planning with their grade level to formulate grade specific goals. These goals are in turn aligned with the school and district strategic plans. It is imperative that administrators seek and plan opportunities for teachers to receive feedback and support from colleagues. Ensuring this support is important to each teacher's professional development (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Rural area administrators must use data to set professional growth priorities. The location of a school, however remote, is no excuse not to use the latest research based practices in order to foster teacher growth. Children living in rural districts often face as much poverty as those living in inner city schools. It becomes the administrator's job in conjunction with district level leaders to address specific issues that affect the students being served by the district.

Professional Growth, Improvement and Development Critical for Rural Schools

The following information includes practices that are good for all administrators in all areas. These practices are especially critical to administrators in small rural districts where resources are not plentiful.

Administrators must act as motivators and supporters of teachers. Outcomes are more positive when teachers view their campus level administrator as a helper, supporter, a source of information, and resource for professional development. This administrator must share articles, websites, tapes, books, and information about topics, conferences, and workshops of interest to teachers. Teachers are comfortable sharing their professional goals and asking their campus level administrator for assistance in pursuing professional growth opportunities. Teachers feel more confident when they believe their campus level administrator wants them to further their knowledge and increase their skills. Teachers are also willing to ask for help. An administrator must communicate with enthusiasm and express a sincere interest in teachers' learning. This often makes it possible for teachers to participate in professional development opportunities without being asked. The administrator must also encourage teachers to share what they have learned from their professional growth experiences (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Teachers should be encouraged to make presentations at staff meetings, conferences, and conventions in order to share and gain information about best researched based practices with colleagues and other professionals. Again, teachers must be encouraged to share information they gain from workshops and conferences with other staff members at grade level or staff meetings (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Often campus level administrators must promote new ideas and support teachers as they attempt to use the latest technology and materials. Spending time with teachers and providing support as they work through problems is a necessity. Teachers need to be encouraged to practice new ideas and technology. Their progress seems to occur quicker when administrators express enthusiasm and give positive reinforcement as teachers utilize new technology and materials (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Campus level administrators must provide resources and find creative ways to give teachers the time, money, and support they need for professional development. Many teachers are very willing to learn new strategies and techniques but are frequently prevented from doing so because of time constraints, lack of funds, or the absence of administrative support. The campus level administrator must actively seek ways to help teachers find the time to learn and provide teachers with the available resources and the encouragement they need (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Along with the central office administrators, the campus level administrator must allocate time during the school day for professional development activities. In order to provide time for teacher professional development in a rural district, the campus level administrator can occasionally arrange for teachers on the same grade level to share a substitute by dividing the training in half so that each teacher can have a half day available for professional development. This strategy enables teachers to have some time during the school day to work with colleagues without necessitating an entire day away from students and the school building (Helge, 1985).

Teacher professional development also occurs through alternative activities such as conversations among teachers about common concerns, ideas for classroom lessons and effective teaching strategies, and formal and informal observations of teachers in their interactions with students. The campus level administrator can help to orchestrate the informal learning of teachers through strategic assignment of classrooms and lunch periods, through conversations with teachers about what other teachers are doing in their classrooms, and through modeling or describing effective teaching at faculty gatherings and meetings (Helge, 1985).

When there is an expensive workshop that is being offered at a distance, it is often a good idea for rural administrators to cooperate with a teacher's service center or to contact neighboring rural districts and attempt to bring the speaker in at a shared cost (Helge, 1985).

Teacher professional development is critical to school improvement and increased student learning. As the leader of a learning organization, an administrator must motivate teachers to continue to grow professionally throughout their careers. By setting the expectation for ongoing learning, modeling continual learning, supporting teachers as they learn new skills and increase their knowledge, and facilitating teacher professional growth activities, the administrator encourages teachers to work collaboratively in order to improve student achievement (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

The campus level administrator can serve as the facilitator for professional development activities, arrange for outside consultants, and coordinate the logistics for school wide professional development. The campus level administrator can also recruit teachers from within the school to conduct professional development activities. By providing time, resources, and support for teachers to plan and prepare for the training, the campus level administrator can affirm their expertise and acknowledge their valuable

role as contributors to the continual professional growth of their colleagues. Depending on an individual administrator's knowledge, skill, and interest, a campus level administrator can also occasionally conduct professional development activities for teachers (Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning **Rural Administrators Must Use Their Insights in Working with Others**

In his book, *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*, Dr. William A. Kiritsonis (2007) defines *synnoetics* as personal knowledge. Synnoetics is not a subject that can be directly taught. Synnoetics are lessons that are learned indirectly. They are insights that are gained from experiences. Synnoetics refers to the insight that a person has into his own being and the insight that the same person has into the lives of other people.

It is no secret that the use of personal knowledge, what one knows, can often afford an individual the opportunity to make advancements. The understanding of self and of other people can lead a person to make decisions, which are either beneficial or detrimental (Townsell, 2006). Therefore, rural administrators must use their insights about people in order to understand the culture and the expectations of their communities in order to recruit, hire, and foster the professional growth of the teachers in the school district.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers is one of the chief concerns facing rural school administrators. The role of the rural school administrator often requires those individuals to become directly involved in every aspect of a school's functions. Keeping the lines of communication open between all stakeholders and involving them in the research and decision making for staff development are the keys to quality change. Understanding the culture and expectations of the community works to the advantage of rural administrators as they work to recruit, hire, and foster the professional growth of teachers in their school districts.

Teachers new to the district need to be given assistance in adapting to the day-to-day functions of their schools. They need specific information about the culture surrounding the school and the community. Understanding the reasons that teachers decide to live in rural areas and seeking individuals most likely to be sold on the benefits of teaching in a rural school is recommended. Such individuals usually have rural backgrounds, personal characteristics, or educational experiences that predispose them for life in a rural area (Collins, 1999).

Finally, the main focus for recruitment, hiring, and provision of quality staff development in any location should be the students. We cannot afford to offer them less than the best teachers.

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